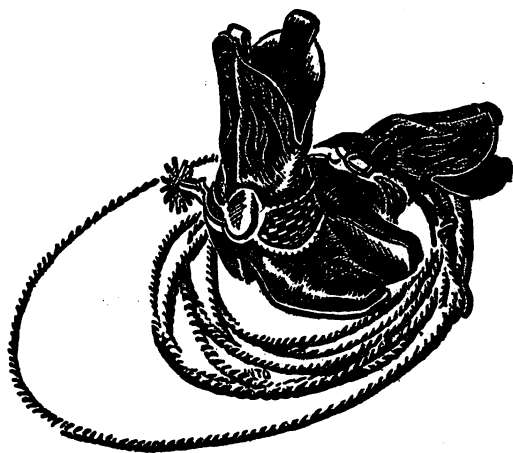


The Mystery of Crystal Canyon





The Mystery of
CRYSTAL
CANYON

BY RUTHERFORD MONTGOMERY

Illustrated by Taylor Oughton



THE JOHN C. WINSTON COMPANY

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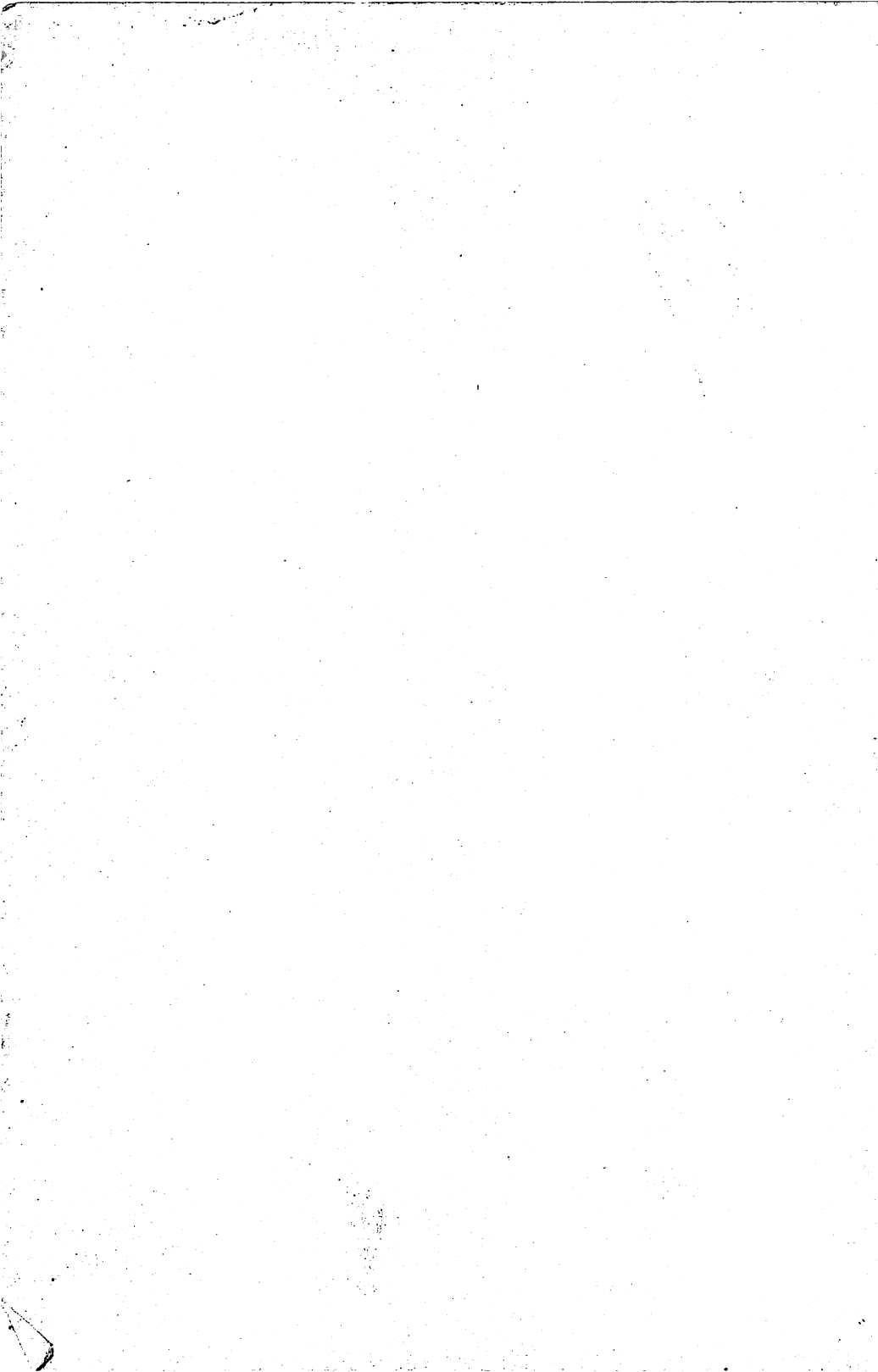
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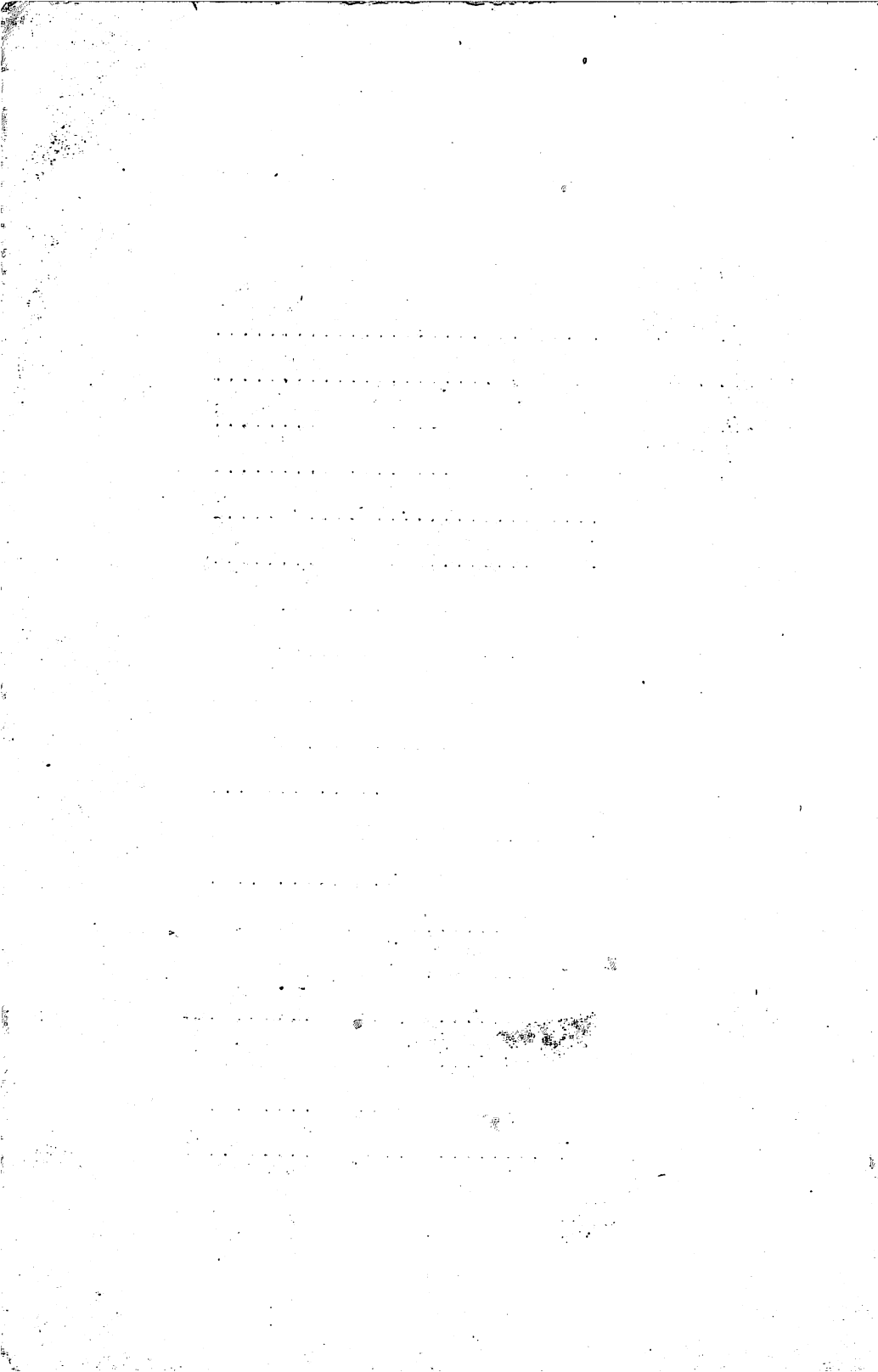
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For Bart Campbell



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Chapter I

TROUBLE

IN THE WIDE VALLEY where the buildings of the Lazy Y ranch stood, the grass was showing green in the meadows. Along the meandering course of Crystal River, willow buds were bursting into pale leaves. The slopes of the snow range overlooking the valley were seamed and gashed by spring slides. Spring always comes late to the high grass ranges of the Colorado Rockies. On the granite peaks overlooking the valley the snow would remain through most of the summer, with many deep drifts that never melted at all because they were on north slopes.

Kenny Reed stood beside the station wagon in the barnyard of the ranch, his hands thrust into his pockets. He shoved his hat back on his head 'as he squinted

against the slanting sunlight at his saddle horse, Buck, who stood at the corral gate watching him. Buck was sure Kenny would have a lump of sugar for him. Kenny grinned at the rugged broncho. Buck was a near Palomino with plenty of power, but a very uncertain temper, hardly the kind of horse one would pick for grace and beauty or to decorate a bridle path. Breaking him had been a slow and dangerous job, but Kenny had accomplished it without help from anyone.

As Kenny moved to the gate, he pulled one hand out of his pocket and extended it toward Buck. The horse rolled his eyes until the whites flared. He snorted as he tossed his blond mane out of his eyes, then eased his pink muzzle through the poles of the gate, his sensitive lips reaching for the lump of sugar. Kenny leaned across the top rail and ran a hand along the horse's neck. Buck flinched at the touch of the hand, but did not leap back. Kenny's hand moved upward until his fingers were deep in the thick mane.

"We fooled Tex, didn't we?" he said softly.

Buck snorted and pawed. He wanted another lump of sugar. Kenny gave him one, as he dug his fingers deep into the hair between Buck's ears and scratched hard. Buck turned his head and shoved, because he liked being scratched between the ears.

Tex Holland, the Lazy Y range boss, had tried to keep Kenny from breaking the horse, because he thought the broncho was too tough for a boy. Tex had been managing the ranch for so many years that he naturally gave orders to everyone, but Kenny had fooled Tex by going to his father for permission to bring Buck in from the range. Kenny didn't want the broncho gentled

in the usual manner; he had set out to gentle him without breaking his spirit. He wanted a one-man horse, a partner and not a slave who obeyed because he was afraid of the man who rode him.

Kenny glanced toward the barn. He had seen Tex at the corral, and he wanted to talk with him. Tex had been treating Kenny coldly for weeks, speaking only when spoken to, ignoring the boy the rest of the time. Kenny meant to put it squarely to Tex; he was ready to say he was sorry, and was willing to admit he hadn't gone about it in the right way when he brought Buck in.

There was something else on Tex's mind that interested Kenny. The range boss had been in a black mood for a week. He had found a squatter in Pine Valley, a high, snug bit of grassland above the ranch. The squatter had frankly admitted he had moved in to round up a band of wild horses. Tex considered the horses Lazy Y property, although none of them carried a Lazy Y brand, nor was a single acre of the valley ranch property. But the Lazy Y had always used the range, and that was enough for Tex.

As Kenny walked toward the barn, Buck followed along the fence, his neck arched. Kenny frowned as he stopped at the door of the barn. He really was uneasy about Tex, as much because of the squatter as over his own quarrel with the range boss. Tex was apt to do something about the squatter, for he was a man who believed in action, not just talk or legal foolishness.

Inside the barn Kenny paused, and for a second his worries banished as he looked at the new saddle his father had bought for him. As soon as the cinches arrived he would try it out on Buck. It was a saddle

designed for roping, with a heavy roll that afforded knee support, and a large horn. Kenny had selected Buck as his because he had the build of a rope horse. When the saddle was fitted out he would rack it in the saddle horse, and he would give his old saddle to his twin sister, Pat, along with his mare, Reddy.

Angry voices floated in through the partly open back door of the barn, causing Kenny to turn abruptly away from the saddle. He recognized Tex's voice, and the tone of it made Kenny move quickly toward the door. At the door he halted, held back by a feeling that he should not break in on the argument.

As he looked down the road that passed below the barn he saw Tex standing there facing a man about his own size. Kenny was sure it was Matt Milner, the squatter, for he had met him once on a trail above the ranch. Matt had dropped a pack he was carrying, and was facing Tex. At his feet lay his dog, Shag. Remembering how friendly Shag had been on their one meeting, Kenny was startled by the savage way the animal was eying Tex. Head on paws, his fangs bared, his whole body seemed tensed for a spring as he lay snarling at Tex.

Shag was big and powerful, with the markings of a collie, but with traces of another breed in the ears and the muzzle, which was wider and not so long as that of a collie. He had filled out and put on weight since last summer when Kenny had seen him, and was no longer a pup.

Kenny sensed a show-down now between Tex and Matt. Matt had been away all winter, and this was his first trip into the high country that spring. Tex had

quieted down during the winter because he thought Matt might not come back, but now that the squatter was back and headed for Pine Valley, there was bound to be trouble.

"You better get out of this country!" Tex's voice rose loud and angry.

"I bought tax title to that claim in Pine Valley," Matt replied quietly. "I own it, and I own the cabin on it. I'm staying."

Tex took a step forward, disregarding Shag, his hands balled into fists. "You're getting out. You're not rounding up that band of horses."

Shag leaped to his feet, a snarl rumbling in his throat.

"Down, Shag!" Matt ordered as his hand dropped to the dog's head.

Shag settled back to his crouching position at Matt's feet, but he did not take his eyes off Tex, and his fangs remained bared.

"As soon as the slides stop running in the canyon, and the trail clears, I'm bringing in a string of horses and a couple of men," Matt continued angrily. "I'm rounding up that wild band; that's why I bought the land."

"You're not moving into Lazy Y range to poach horses." Tex's face was very red and his eyes blazed as he spoke.

"The Lazy Y has no claim on Pine Valley, and you do not have a brand on any of those horses. If the stallion leading them has stolen any of your mares, they will be returned to you." Matt's hands rested on his hips as he made that statement, shoulders hunched forward a trifle.

ride along with him. That would give the range boss a chance to cool off.

He got his saddle and bridle from the rack and dragged them to the corral gate. In his excitement he ran the last few yards, and heaved the saddle up on the top rail as he reached the fence. Buck looked startled, and backed away, rolling his eyes and arching his neck as if he sensed the tense excitement in Kenny. When Kenny opened the gate, Buck plunged away to the far side of the corral.

Holding the bridle behind him, Kenny moved toward the horse. He spoke soothingly as he advanced. "Easy, big boy, easy."

Buck danced away; Kenny moved toward him and talked in a soothing voice in an attempt to reassure him, at the same time extending his hand with a lump of sugar in it. Buck snorted, then plunged past him, coming to a halt at the gate. Kenny stood looking at Buck. At this rate it might take an hour to work Buck out of his tantrum, but this was no time to try fighting it out with the horse. He was confident he could rope Buck and choke him down, but what would happen after that might very well ruin him. If Kenny were thrown, if he lost the fight that would be sure to follow as soon as he managed to get a saddle on Buck, that would be the end of the Palomino as a saddle horse. Tex had been sure Buck was an outlaw, fit only to serve as a rodeo buckner, and this incident might prove Tex to be right.

Kenny rattled one lump of sugar against another. Buck pricked his ears forward as he heard the click of the cubes, but when Kenny moved toward him the

horse leaped away. For a moment Kenny stood at the gate before hanging his bridle over the saddle horn, then he opened it, pulled the saddle off the top pole, and dumped it on the ground. He'd have to go down to the pasture after Reddy. He started out, but stopped before he had gone far, for a half-mile away he saw Reddy galloping across the pasture with Pat astride her. Apparently Pat did not see him when he waved to her; she was in a hurry to catch up with their father. Kenny watched her as she bent down to open the upper gate without dismounting. Reddy moved through the open gate and Pat slipped the wire loop into place, then she sent Reddy up the slope at a gallop.

Kenny turned back to the corral, then leaned over the top rail and scowled at Buck. He was wondering if Tex were taking the ledge trail or riding up through the canyon. He had an idea Tex would take the ledge trail, even though it was seven miles farther that way. Since he was mounted, he could get to the cabin in Pine Valley before Matt could reach there.

Kenny was roused from his thoughts by Buck, who had sauntered over to the gate and was nudging the boy's arm. "You big bluffer," Kenny said sourly.

Buck nudged harder, shoving Kenny's elbow off the pole. Kenny picked up the bridle and opened the gate. Buck let him slip the bit between his teeth and ease the head strap over his ears. Three minutes later the saddle was cinched up and Kenny was on Buck's back. The best plan seemed to be to head straight for Pine Valley. Buck deserved to be pushed hard, Kenny decided, and would not mind holding a fast pace, so he gave the big horse his head and galloped away.



Chapter 2

POWDER SMOKE

KENNY RODE the high ridge overlooking Crystal Canyon, keeping to the south slopes where the ground was free of late snow. The canyon yawned below him like a ragged crack in the earth, its high walls shutting out the sunshine so that its depths were dusky with shadows. A chill wind sucking up out of the depths carried the rumble of flood waters as they boiled over granite boulders. Crystal River had cut the narrow outlet through the granite ridge from Pine Valley, freeing a deep lake and leaving rich meadows. Across on the north rim, great banks of dirty snow clung to the steep slopes. In a few places these had loosened and plunged into the canyon, leaving raw scars where the slides had run.

Kenny checked the soft earth for the marks of shod hoofs, but found only deer and elk tracks and the spoor of a black bear that had headed down country from its winter den. If Tex had passed that way, he had kept to the timber and ignored the trail. Kenny wasted precious time scouting up and down the slope. In so vast and wild a range, Tex could have taken any one of a dozen routes, although the trail would have been the natural way, unless he wished to conceal his movements.

Pulling up on a high ridge, the boy looked to the west and realized that if he pushed on into Pine Valley, darkness would be on him before he could reach Matt's cabin. He had failed to find Tex, and that failure made him uneasy. He swung Buck to the right and headed the horse down country, letting him have his head.

As he broke out of the spruce timber above the ranch, he saw lights go on in the house, first in the kitchen and then in the dining room and living rooms. Buck galloped across the open meadow, sliding to a quick halt at the corral gate. Kenny bent forward on the saddle, his eyes searching the hitch rack, then shifting to the corral. Tex's horse was not at the feed rack; ordinarily this would not have been disturbing, because Tex often rode late, but tonight it gave Kenny a panicky feeling. As he swung out of the saddle, he told himself he was being silly, that he was too much concerned over nothing.

He unsaddled Buck and rubbed him down, then shoved alfalfa hay into his feed rack and dumped a measure of oats into his grain box. Bob Reed, Kenny's father, insisted that every man who worked for him, and he included his son in that list, must care for his

horse before getting his own meal. Kenny had learned this rule as soon as he started to ride.

When he opened the kitchen door, he stood blinking in the bright light. His mother was dishing up the supper, and Pat was helping her. Pat was rosy-cheeked from her long ride that afternoon, her nose was freckled from the wind and the sun. When she moved past Kenny, her eyes were on a level with his for she was nearly as tall as he was.

"Where have you been?" she asked as she halted beside him with a steaming pot in her hands.

"Up on the ridge." Kenny was careful not to arouse her curiosity.

"Dad and I rode clear up to the crags. You should have been along. I looked for you before I left." Pat gave her brother a sharp look. "Buck was in the corral, but I didn't see anything of you, and I had to hurry or Dad would have given me the slip."

"I was in the barn," Kenny answered, trying to make his reply sound casual. He knew from experience that Pat could tell when he was trying to hide something from her. They not only looked alike but they also thought alike, and sometimes Kenny was sure that Pat knew what was in his mind without his telling her. To avoid further conversation, he moved quickly through the kitchen.

Pat sniffed as she followed him into the dining room. "Mooning over that new saddle?" She was a bit miffed because she had to take his old one.

Kenny didn't answer, but kept on going. As he entered the living room, he could hear his father's typewriter clicking away in his office. The ranch hands

were sitting around the dining room waiting for supper. Bob Reed always insisted that his men eat with the family, and he never hired a man who could not sit down at the table with Amy, his wife, and with Pat.

Oats, whose real name was Martin Pepper, sat in a big chair, his hair slicked back and soap-plastered to his head. He had been with the Lazy Y as long as Kenny could remember. He grinned and winked at Kenny as if he had a secret he could tell if he wanted to. Hank stood at the front window, his big, rangy shoulders slightly hunched. He half-turned, as if to speak, but didn't say anything. Hank had once been a trainer of race horses and had as his special job all the vet work that was necessary. Elmo sat at the piano, picking out a melody with one finger. When Kenny moved over beside him, he tapped a few notes of "Oh! Susanna," then grinned at Kenny.

"I've about got the chorus," he said as he started over again, tapping out each note slowly and carefully.

In spite of his worry, Kenny had to smile at Elmo's attempt to pick out a tune. He watched him as his smooth, dark face pulled into grim lines, and he bit his upper lip. Elmo was a Mexican boy, an excellent horseman, and reckless in a happy, careless way when he was not concentrating on music. He was just two years older than Kenny, but for more than eight years he had been riding for pay.

Mrs. Reed came in from the kitchen with a platter of fried chicken, which she set on the big center table. She rearranged the pile of biscuits Pat had tumbled into a big bowl, then turned toward the office door.

"Bob, supper is on," she called.

The typewriter stopped clattering at once, and a moment later Bob Reed stood in the doorway, smiling about the room.

Mr. Reed was tall and broad-shouldered; his face smooth and wind-tanned. The tight-fitting levi riding pants he wore gave him a slim-hipped look, and the high-heeled boots gave his walk a typical cow-hand gait.

Kenny looked like his father, except that Kenny's hair had a tinge of red like his mother's in it. The day would come when these two would look more like brothers than father and son, because Bob Reed was a man who did not show his age. He smiled at his wife as he came into the room. She was small and slim, with red hair and freckles across the bridge of her nose, and so tiny that she barely came up to her husband's shoulder.

"I'm more than ready for chow," he greeted them.

As the men started to the table, Kenny found himself listening for Tex's approach, but he was the last one into the dining room and the last to be seated at the table. No one seemed to miss him, but that was natural because he was often late for his meals. Seated beside Kenny, Pat laughed and joked with Elmo, whose black eyes danced as he argued hotly with her. Kenny knew he should get into the argument as he always did, but he didn't seem to be able somehow to keep up with the rapid fire of banter between the two. The rest of the family had nothing to say, but left the talking to Pat and Elmo. Quickly finishing his supper, Kenny excused himself and went to the stable. He had already rubbed down Buck, but he went into the saddle house and got the curry comb and brush. Rubbing

Buck down again would give him an excuse for staying at the corral until Tex arrived. He was going over Buck a second time when Pat appeared. She slipped through the pole gate and walked toward him with an easy stride that was more like a man's walk than that of a girl.

Like her mother, Pat had red hair, with a golden glint that shone in the moonlight. She wasn't small even now, and she would be tall and much heavier than her mother when she was as old as her mother. She halted beside Kenny and stood watching him, her hands on her hips, the way Hank or Elmo would have stood.

"What's eating you?" she asked sharply.

Kenny continued to curry Buck, who grunted his pleasure at this unusual attention. But he wasn't fooling Pat. She always knew when he was upset or when he was trying to keep something to himself.

"Nothing's eating me," he said cautiously.

"Something's up. You can't fool me. Come on. Tell me." Pat slid a hand along Buck's neck. Again Kenny had the feeling they were more like one person than two, for Buck allowed no one to handle him but Kenny, yet here he was rubbing his head against Pat's arm.

Kenny slid the curry comb into his hip pocket and began to brush the horse. It wasn't that he didn't trust Pat, but he had to think this thing through, to wait and see if there really was anything to worry about. He knocked the dust out of the brush on his boot heel before he spoke.

"Can't a fellow even rub a horse down without being up to something?" he asked peevishly.

Pat shrugged her shoulders. She realized she wasn't going to get any information out of Kenny at the moment, but she meant to find out eventually what was bothering him. Without another word, she turned and walked away. Kenny watched her go with an uneasy feeling. He knew she was suspicious, and that was bad, but she hadn't tried to make him tell her anything.

Ten minutes later Tex rode in through the corral, pulling up at the door of the saddle house. He unsaddled his horse, put away the saddle, then turned the horse into the corral. As they met at the gate, he spoke gruffly to Kenny. Kenny handed him the comb and brush. Tex took them without a word and followed his horse into the corral.

Kenny stopped at the saddle house to rack up his own saddle, which he had tossed on the floor after stripping it off Buck. He snapped on the lights and picked it up, swinging it to its peg on the wall. As he reached for the light switch, he looked out through the open door and saw Tex heading for the bunkhouse. Tex had not taken time to feed or rub down his horse. As the bunkhouse door slammed, Kenny turned back to the gear Tex had racked on the wall. The carbine, instead of being in the gun rack, was still in its boot under the saddle flap.

It was foolish to keep thinking of such things, but he could not take his eyes from the carbine. He reached out and slid the rifle from its boot. It was a 303 Savage with a small window on the side plate that indicated the contents of the magazine. Numbers in the small window indicated how many cartridges were left in

the gun. Kenny could clearly see a number 3 in the opening.

That fact could mean nothing, as Tex might not have filled the magazine before he left, but if he had filled it, there would have been a number 5 exposed. Kenny swung the barrel toward him and sniffed. The smell of powder was fresh and strong.

The rifle suddenly seemed hot in his hands, so he shoved it quickly back into the saddle boot and snapped off the lights. Then he stepped outside and stood looking toward the bunkhouse. A light burned in one of the windows of the long, low building. He could hear Hank's mouth organ wailing out a mournful tune. Hurriedly Kenny moved toward the house.

It was Kenny's job to keep the rack of saddle guns in shape. Just the evening before he had oiled and cleaned every gun. Saddle guns need attention because they are exposed to all sorts of weather, and smokeless powder injures the bore if it is left in the rifling. There was no room for doubt—Tex had fired the rifle that afternoon.

Kenny knew he should have wiped out the rifle, oiled it and returned it to the rack. Any other time, that was what he would have done, and he would not have given it a second thought. As he opened the kitchen door, he knew he had left the rifle because he thought Tex might wish to slip out and clean it himself.

There was no one in the kitchen, for which he was glad. The lights were out and the room was dark except for a band of light that came in through the open dining-room door. Kenny looked through the door and

saw his mother seated by the fireplace. Pat lay on the bear rug before the fire reading a book aloud to her mother. Kenny turned softly toward the back stairs and made his way to his room over the kitchen.

He undressed without turning on the light, then slipped into bed and lay facing the wide window. White moonlight streamed into the room. Kenny stared at the closed window, trying to decide whether to get out of bed to open it. He always slept with his window open, even in the coldest weather, so after a bit he tossed the covers back and got out of bed. After opening the window, he stood for a time looking down into the yard.

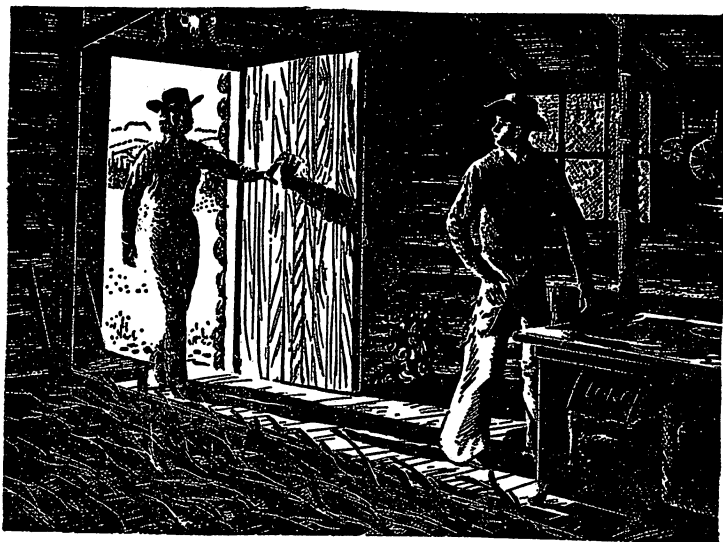
He must have stayed longer than he had intended to, for a cold draft chilled him and his feet began to feel icy. As he turned from the window he saw Tex coming out of the bunkhouse. He knew now that was what he had been waiting for, and he forgot he was chilled. He saw Tex walk across the yard to the saddle house and enter. No lights came on in the saddle house, but Tex stayed there for some time. When he came out he walked back to the bunkhouse.

It took a long time to get to sleep after that. When Kenny's mother came up the back stairs and looked in on him, he was awake, but he kept his eyes closed. She moved softly into the room and stood beside the bed, leaned over and tucked the heavy comfort around his shoulders, then picked up his shirt and socks from the chair and went out of the room.

Kenny tried to think of many things. School was out and the whole summer was ahead of him, a summer in the saddle with Buck to work into a rope horse.

Soon there would be a calf round-up. He and Pat would ride the mountain trails, and there would be hunting and fishing between spells of work. This summer Pat would have Reddy, and she would ride with Kenny on many trips. This would be her first summer with a saddle horse of her own. He smiled as he thought of the wonderful times they would have together.

No matter how hard he tried, his thoughts kept coming back to Tex—of seeing Tex's face twisted with rage. Kenny's mind would start going over everything that had happened; it did no good to tell himself that in the morning he would ride up to Pine Valley and find Matt and Shag at the cabin.



Chapter 3

SHAG WAITS

THE LAZY Y RANCH had not always been such an extensive establishment. When Amy and Bob Reed first came to the valley, they brought with them a few head of white-faced cows, a good grade bull and four saddle horses. Bob Reed had built a log cabin and a pole shelter shed for the stock, with a corral near it. He had cut and stacked enough hay to carry the stock through that first winter.

There had been many hard winters, when keeping the stock alive had been tough, hard work. And there had been long summers when Mrs. Reed rode beside her husband, making it unnecessary to hire a man at branding time or when the range had to be ridden and drift fences had to be fixed.

By the time Pat and Kenny were born, things had begun to look better. Bob Reed could afford to hire a man, and he had brought Oats out to the ranch. The big barn had been built and the cattle sheds and the feed racks for winter feeding had been added. These were followed by the ranch house, because it was needed more desperately than a bigger house. Now the old log house had become the bunkhouse, and the cottonwoods that Kenny's mother had planted in its yard shaded the building.

The Lazy Y ran several thousand head of white-faced cattle and close to a hundred horses. It was a modern ranch with piped water and electric lights furnished by a home plant. A trip to town no longer took two days, because there was an auto road close by and the station wagon could make the distance in a few hours. But the Lazy Y was still isolated because it was walled in by mountain ranges on both sides. The winters were still long and severe, with snow sometimes lying six feet deep on the level ground.

In the winter the cattle pounded down the snow in the field below the barn where they were held in a feed lot. During the short, lush summer, when showers fell almost daily and the sun beat down warmly, the cattle were out on the range, and in the fall they came in grass fat, with hundreds of pounds of growth on the young stock.

Sunday was a lazy day at the ranch. Hank sat on the bunkhouse steps playing his harmonica. He favored sad tunes that he had picked up from the bunkhouse radio. Leaning back with his eyes closed, he cupped the harmonica between his big hands and played on.

That was also the one day that Oats did not do anything if he could help it. After caring for his horses, he washed and combed his hair, then just sat in the sun and dozed on a saddle blanket near the door of the saddle house. Pat watched Elmo fashion a hackamore from a length of Manila rope as he sat on an overturned bucket near the corral gate. Kenny stood at the front gate waiting for a chance to slip down to the corral without Pat's noticing him.

As Pat seated herself on the ground in front of Elmo, he flipped the rope over his arm with a flourish, for he was an artist at braiding and splicing rope, and every strand he braided had to be worked into place with care. He had a length of board on his knees, and when the last splice was finished, he rolled the rope over and over on the board to smooth down the Manila strands. After he gave the rope a final hard roll, he tossed the hackamore to Pat.

"Like it?" he asked with a grin.

"It's swell," Pat replied as she slid her fingers over the smooth splicing.

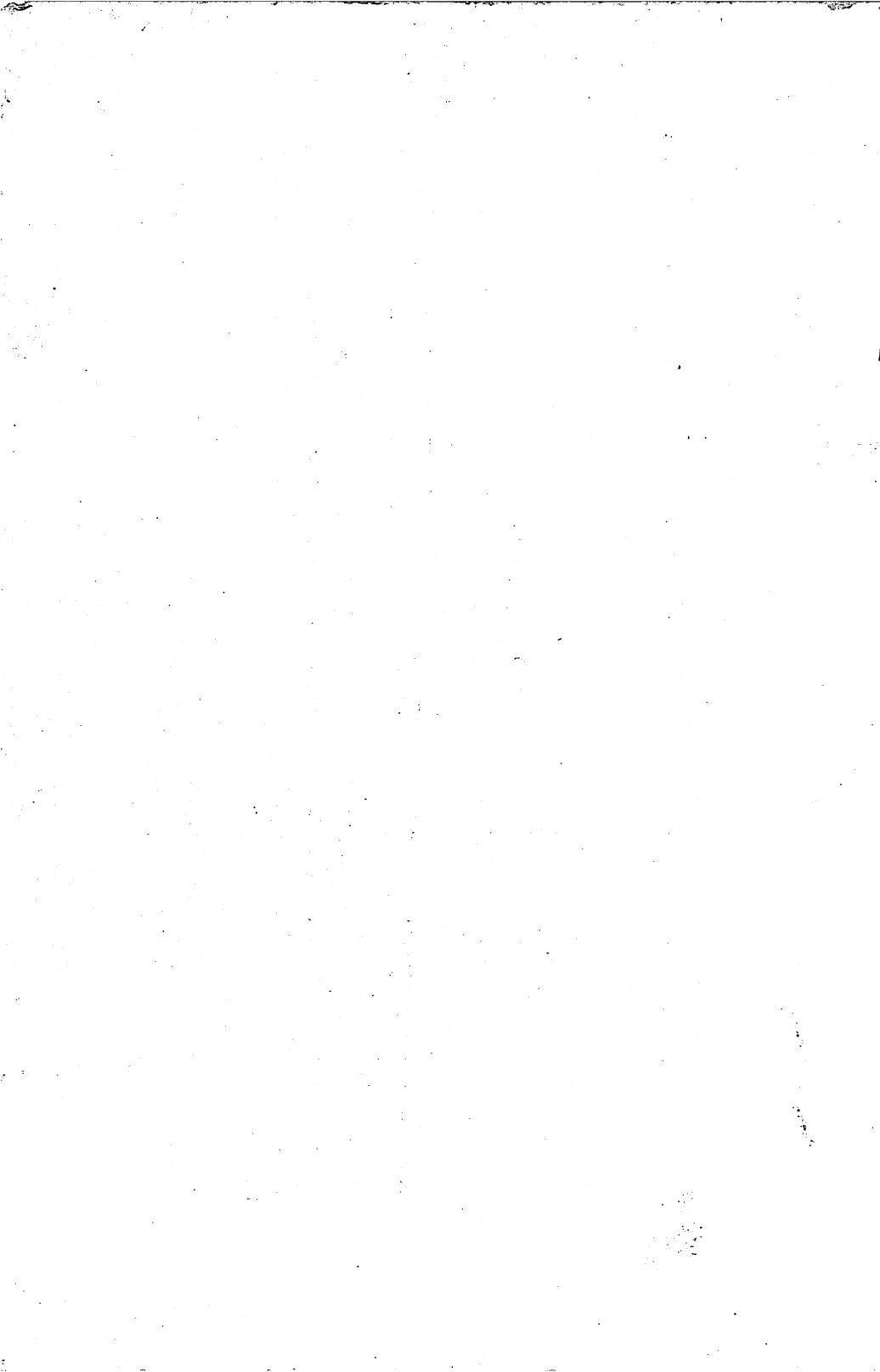
"You can keep it," Elmo said. He was pleased that Pat liked the hackamore, but he tried hard not to show it.

Pat jumped to her feet. "Thanks, Elmo. I've always wanted a really good hackamore." She coiled the length of rope carefully around her hand and forearm.

Elmo shoved his hat back on his head as he watched her and beamed happily. "Oh, it isn't much," he grinned.

Pat whirled around and started toward the house at a run. She spied Kenny before he could duck out of sight and called gaily to him.





"See what Elmo made for me." She dashed past Kenny and into the kitchen to show her mother the hackamore.

Kenny walked quickly down to the corral where Buck stood watching him. Kenny could see that Tex's horse was gone from the string of riding stock. When Kenny entered the saddle house to get his saddle, his glance went at once to the gun rack. He saw all four of the saddle rifles in place, and the 303 Savage showed it had been wiped and oiled. Kenny pulled his saddle from its peg and dragged it out to the corral gate.

Buck permitted Kenny to catch and saddle him. The horse did not like the small corral, and he knew Kenny would go for a ride. Having lived on the open range all his life, he did not like to be fenced in. Kenny led Buck out through the barn so he could give Pat the slip. Once in the saddle he let Buck shake his mane and break away toward the timber at a fast gallop.

By the time they reached the top of the ridge, Buck had slowed his pace to a lope, as the climb had been steep and the trail rough. He was blowing so hard that Kenny pulled him up at the edge of a small park.

Two buck mule deer appeared at the lower edge of the park. Kenny recognized the one in the lead—a big saddleback that was well-known because of the blanket of white hair across his back. He was gaunt and shaggy and his antlers were gone. Kenny remembered how sleek and powerful the saddleback had been last fall when he came down from the high country. At that time his horns had been shining lances of bone, and he had been filled with a savage vitality. Now he was a gaunt, half-starved fellow moving slowly up to

a sanctuary in the hills where he could grow new horns and put on layers of fat. When the aspen leaves turned yellow and the scrub oak matted the foothills like a red carpet, he would return seeking the shy does, and ready to fight any other buck he met. Right now he was a sorry sight, and he was willing to let the smaller buck trail along with him for company.

— When Kenny started Buck along the ridge, the two battered knights gave the horseman only a brief glance. Kenny grinned as he recalled how he had passed up the saddleback while hunting the fall before. Because he had become a sort of Lazy Y fixture, none of the boys had bothered him.

Kenny followed the ridge until he was above the lower end of Pine Valley before swinging down into the heavy timber. The big woods were strangely silent. Only the angry chattering of a chickaree furnished proof that there was life in that belt of timber. The summer birds would later fill the woods with song and chatter, but now there was only the noisy chickaree and those silent ones, the blue grouse and the camp robber. The green twilight held the atmosphere of winter, but not the same smell. The air was rich with the aroma of damp earth and fresh green life pushing up through the carpet of needles.

Kenny located a trail he knew. Buck did not want to follow it because it headed back along the slope. He wanted to head deeper into the high country where he had roamed as a colt.

Kenny pulled Buck to a halt at a spot where the trail broke out on the floor of the valley. He had always liked this snug, tall grass valley surrounded by moun-

tains through which the headwaters of the Crystal River meandered lazily. In summer it was lush and green, while in winter it offered shelter for deer and elk as well as for the band of wild horses. At the upper end there was a warm spring that stayed open during the coldest weather.

Pine Valley might easily have been the home of the Lazy Y, but it was always snowbound during the winter. Building a road into the valley would have been very costly. Kenny thought he knew why Matt Milner had bought tax title to the mining claim. Even if there had been no wild horses, the valley would have lured a mountain man and held him.

Buck pawed impatiently, and Kenny let him move along the edge of the timber. The mining cabin stood at the lower end of the valley where the placid waters of the river burst into life and plunged down through the canyon. The claim was a gold placer that had been worked out years before. The stout log cabin needed only a few repairs to make it livable. It was tucked away where no vandals came upon it to break the windows or steal the door.

As they neared the cabin, Kenny felt a surge of relief run through him. He saw Shag lying on the flat stone before the closed door. The dog got to his feet and bared his fangs as Kenny pulled up.

"Hello, Shag," Kenny called. "Matt at home?"

Shag growled, but the tip of his bushy tail jerked eagerly. When Kenny swung down out of the saddle, the collie moved toward the corner of the cabin, where he stood for a moment before slipping from sight.

Kenny frowned. The dog's actions made him uneasy,

and he stepped quickly to the door. He rapped hard, waited a moment, then rapped again. There was no answer.

"Matt!" he called loudly.

The only answer was a sharp bark from the woods behind the cabin. Immediately Kenny jerked the raw-hide latchstring, and the door swung open.

A quick glance inside the one room showed that no one was there. As he stepped over the threshold the cold staleness of a deserted house chilled him. He did not have to make a careful search to know that Matt Milner had never reached the cabin. There was no sign of a pack, and on the dusty top of the iron stove Kenny saw rat tracks.

As Kenny moved toward the stove, a step at the door made him turn quickly. Pat stood in the doorway.

"His dog is back but he never got here," she said with finality.

Kenny knew now that Pat could not be kept out of his plans. He might have known she'd trail him. Her interest in the hackamore had just been a trick to fool him. She had been curious to know what he was going to do, but the less she knew the less she would worry. He looked at her keenly, wondering just how much she really did know about the situation.

"Shag is here, so Matt is bound to show up after a bit," he said to throw her off the trail.

Pat wasn't satisfied with that answer. She shook her head. "Elmo said he saw Matt on the trail yesterday. He had plenty of time to make it in." She drew a finger across the dusty stove lid. When she lifted her eyes to Kenny's face, he could see she was frightened.

"Tex is mixed up in this, isn't he?"

"No he isn't," Kenny answered impatiently.

"Tex has been telling everyone what he'd do if Matt Milner came back."

"Tex will be able to clear up his end of this," Kenny said stubbornly.

Pat stared about the room, then turned back to him, her eyes sparkling. "You know something no one else knows," she said accusingly, "and you're scared."

"I don't know anything for sure, and I'm not doing any loose talking." But Kenny had a feeling that he would eventually tell Pat what he knew.

A low whine from the door made them both turn quickly. Shag stood there wagging his tail. Pat crossed the room and slipped her arm around the dog's neck. Shag did not try to pull away; he whined eagerly and continued to wag his tail.

"Matt may have had an accident down in the canyon," Pat ventured. "Shag will lead us to him; won't you, Shag?"

"Shag wouldn't leave Matt if he was hurt," Kenny argued.

"Matt has sent him for help. You can see that by the way he acts. Let's go find Matt, Shag!" Pat took hold of the dog's collar and stepped outside the door.

Kenny stood for a minute watching them. There was something wrong he was sure, for the collie was acting strangely. Shag was a very intelligent dog. He was show quality, and he stood beside Pat, his head cocked and his ears standing up straight, apparently eager to make Pat understand something. Kenny walked out of the cabin and stood looking at the dog.

The girl sensed her brother's feeling. "The way he acts you'd think Matt was right here," she said. "No," she shook her head, "he couldn't be."

"If he was here or if he is down in the canyon, Shag would be with him." Kenny tried to make it sound convincing.

"We'll have to go down the canyon trail," Pat said.

"I'll go, but I'll have to leave Buck here. You can't go. There'll be washouts and bad spots." Kenny began pulling on his gloves. "I'll take Shag with me."

"Why can't I go?" Pat demanded.

"Because the trail is dangerous at this time of year. You'd just slow me down. You watch Buck. You can look around here until I get back." Kenny meant to be firm about it.

Pat knew her brother was right, so she did not argue the matter. She knew the canyon trail was wet and dangerous. In many places Kenny would have to wade through streams of water coming down from the little side canyons.

Kenny patted Shag on the head. "Come along, big boy. We'll go find Matt," he said coaxingly.

The dog did not move. He looked up at Kenny and wagged his tail but did not stir. Pat knelt beside him and stroked his head. "Go find Matt," she coaxed him.

Kenny frowned and reached down and took hold of Shag's collar. The dog pulled back as he tried to lead him away from the cabin. He did not snap at Kenny, but he made it clear he did not want to leave. When they reached a spot where the trail dipped into the canyon, Kenny freed the dog; as quick as a flash Shag whirled and ran back to the cabin. Kenny stood looking

down into the gorge for a few minutes, then returned to where Pat stood. Shag had again stretched himself out on the doorstone.

"I guess there isn't any sense in your going down the canyon," Pat said. "I think Shag was ordered to stay right here. Matt must have gone on without stopping."

Kenny considered this possibility. Matt might have thought Tex would come to the cabin to make trouble, or he might have gone on up country before making camp. Shag's job might be to sound an alarm as he had done when Kenny rode up and entered the cabin.

"It could be that way," he admitted.

Pat continued to build up her theory. "Tex may have met Matt and threatened him. Matt would not want any trouble, so he just went on to another camp, and left Shag here at the cabin to warn if anyone came up here."

"Could be," Kenny agreed.

"I'll bet that's the way it is," Pat said. "It has to be, the way Shag is acting."

"If we can find Matt's camp, we can tell him that Dad won't stand for any trouble. If Tex wants to round up those wild horses he has a right to try, but Matt has the same privilege, and he certainly had a right to buy this claim. Tex or Dad could have bought it." Kenny smiled, because it all sounded so reasonable and simple. He looked up at the sun. "But we'll have to wait until tomorrow to do it. We have to head for home; it's getting late."

"Matt may be here tomorrow," Pat said. "Anyway, we'll be able to find his camp. There'll be smoke from his fire."

Kenny grinned at her. He wasn't so sure Matt's camp

would be easy to find. There was much wild country above the valley and bordering it on all sides.

When they turned to their horses, Kenny started to hold Reddy for Pat, but she flared up.

"I don't need any help," she snapped.

Kenny grinned at her and walked over to where Buck was ground-hitched. Pat was in the saddle before he was seated on Buck. They both looked down at the dog stretched out on the doorstep. Shag made it clear that he was staying right where he was.

✓ As they moved from sight, Kenny in the lead, Shag sent a high, wailing cry after them. It sounded more like the cry of a wolf than that of a dog. Pat shuddered, and Kenny felt chills run up his spine, but neither of them said anything.

They did not talk much on the way home. Kenny set a fast pace so as to get there before darkness settled. Pat swung along, sometimes behind him, sometimes at his side, depending upon the narrowness of the trail. The pace was tiring, but she refused to ask Kenny to go slower. When they reached the corral she swung down quickly. Kenny reached for Reddy's bridle, but Pat led her horse into the corral herself.

"I'll rub her down," she said. "She's my horse, and it's my job to take care of her. I don't need to be babied."

Kenny took care of Buck while she handled Reddy. When they had finished with the horses, she let him drag her saddle to the saddle house, however. As they stepped out into the yard she faced him.

"You'll speak to Dad about this right away?"

Kenny had a feeling he'd better agree or she would go to their father herself. "Sure, I'll tell him," he said.

"You won't be tattling on Tex, because Dad knows about the things Tex has been saying." Pat slapped her riding gloves across the leg of her levis after the fashion of an old hand.

Kenny wanted a little time to decide what he would say to his father. He thought about it as they walked to the house. When they entered the kitchen they learned that their father had taken the station wagon and had driven into town for supplies, and would not be home until the next day. Kenny was relieved, because that would give him time to figure things out.

Tex ate supper with them that night. He didn't talk much, but he wasn't so grim and bleak as he had been the day before.



Chapter 4

CANYON TRAIL

KENNY WAS UP EARLY on Monday morning. Mr. Reed would not be home until evening, which would give him time to ride up to Pine Valley and return before his father got back. Kenny knew he wouldn't be able to slip away without Pat because she was always up early. She was helping their mother with breakfast when Kenny stepped into the kitchen. Over a platter stacked high with hot cakes, she gave him a knowing look, but he paid no attention to her and went on into the dining room and sat down beside Elmo.

Tex entered and seated himself after a gruff good morning to no one particular. He took a stack of cakes and started to butter them. Oats had already eaten his

breakfast, so he shoved back his chair and fished in his shirt pocket for his tobacco sack.

"I better scout the upper country around Pine Valley, Tex," Oats said. "New grass always gets started there before it does on the slopes."

Tex grunted. He slid his knife through the stack of cakes, splitting it into two parts. "You'll ride the oak brush down on Beaver," he ordered. His eyes moved from Oats to Hank and then to Elmo. "All of you understand?"

"We covered that last week," Elmo replied.

"You'll ride where the stock is," Tex said grimly.

"Everything is quiet as a church down there," Elmo muttered as he took off more cakes and emptied a generous amount of sirup over them.

Oats rolled his cigarette and then lighted it, watching Tex all the time out of the corner of his eye. He knew the cows were dropping their calves and that it paid to ride the lower country at such a time.

Tex ate rapidly, stowing away a large breakfast in record time. He finished his coffee and got to his feet abruptly. Glancing around the table as if giving the men a chance to ask any questions they might have on their minds, he turned and strode out of the house.

"I'll bet Tex rides the upper country," Oats announced as soon as the door clicked. "He has business up there."

Hank looked at Oats, but didn't say anything. He just shoved his chair back and lifted his big frame out of it. Elmo stopped stuffing his mouth and grinned.

"Sure he has business up there. Matt Milner just moved in."

Hank glowered at Elmo. "We are better off away from that kind of business," he said gruffly.

"We'll miss a good show," Elmo laughed. "There'll be fireworks when those two meet head on."

"Milner's a fool to cross Tex, but it's no skin off my nose," Oats said as he got to his feet and followed Hank out of the room.

Kenny went on eating in silence. He was ready to leave by the time Elmo had finished his breakfast. Just as they were getting up from the table, Pat came in.

"Hi!" she greeted Elmo.

"Morning," Elmo replied. He turned back toward the table hopefully, but Pat did not ask him to sit down. She nodded to Kenny and then sat down beside him; Elmo, realizing he wasn't wanted, left the room.

"I'm going with you today," she said.

"Tex may ride up that way." Kenny knew he wasn't going to put up much of an argument.

"All the more reason for us to hurry," Pat said eagerly. "Tex is already saddled up. I'll eat fast and come on the run. You can saddle Reddy for me."

"We're acting like saps," Kenny said.

Pat flashed him a smile. "Sure," she agreed pleasantly. "But it's going to be a swell day for a long ride, so I'll just tag along."

Kenny got to his feet. "You better be down at the corral pronto," he said

"I'll be there," Pat said cheerfully.

Kenny frowned at her. She certainly didn't seem worried, and he had a hunch she was enjoying the excitement. "Better wrap up some sandwiches," he called back as he headed for the door.

Pat was down at the corral before Kenny finished saddling their horses. Her excellent spirits irritated him; he couldn't see what there was to feel so good about.

"I'm eager to meet Matt Milner," Pat began. "Elmo says he's a very interesting man."

Kenny handed her Reddy's bridle reins. "You feel pretty sure we'll find him, don't you?" he said.

"Of course we will. Last night I reasoned it all out. And it will happen just the way I have it figured." Pat tossed her head as she made this remark.

They mounted, and Kenny headed up toward the ridge. He had planned to take a different route from the one they had followed the day before. He wanted to stop on several high points from which he could study the parks and slopes below the ridge. If Tex were riding the upper country, Kenny thought he would be able to see him.

Kenny and Pat halted on each of the lookout points and checked the country below. It took him so long each time that Pat became impatient, but there was no sign of the range boss.

They finally headed down through the heavy timber toward Pine Valley. Breaking out into the bottom land a quarter of a mile above Matt Milner's cabin, they broke into a gallop. As they swung around a stand of balsam they saw the cabin, with Shag still lying on the doorstone. One look at the dog told Kenny they would not find Matt inside this time either. Shag got to his feet and barked a welcome to them. When they pulled up in front of the door, he got to his feet and wagged his tail excitedly.

"Hello!" Pat called loudly.

Kenny did not call out, but slid from the saddle and laid a hand on Shag's head; then he reached over him and pulled the latch cord. The door opened, revealing an empty room. The dry, brown boughs on the bunk were undisturbed; everything was just as it had been the day before.

Pat too had dismounted and was standing beside Kenny. "He isn't here," she said, her voice losing all of its former gaiety.

"Sort of wrecks your plot, doesn't it?" Kenny asked.

"Yes," Pat admitted, "it does. But we'll find his camp."

Kenny rumpled the fur on Shag's head. "He hasn't been told to give up his watch," he said. "He's a faithful dog."

"I'll bet he's hungry," Pat said. "I should have brought something for him."

"He can have my sandwiches," Kenny offered.

"We'll feed him, then we'll look for smoke from a campfire," Pat said as she turned toward Reddy to get the package of food.

"There isn't any smoke anywhere," Kenny replied. "I've been checking ever since we headed down from the ridge." He seated himself on the doorstone. "I don't think we're going to find any camp. Shag has been lying right here ever since we left him. He should be with Matt."

Pat had unfastened the saddle thongs from the package of lunch. She stood looking at Kenny.

"But that means something happened to Matt," she said slowly.

Kenny nodded. Pat walked to the stone and sat down beside him. Shag lay with his muzzle on his paws, his eyes on Pat's hands as she unwrapped the sandwiches. She stripped the oiled paper from a cold beef sandwich and held it toward the dog. Shag inched forward, sniffing eagerly.

"It's yours," Pat said coaxingly.

Shag took the sandwich between his teeth. He hesitated a moment before swallowing it in a few gulps. His ears lifted, and he cocked his head eagerly. Kenny watched him as he ate another sandwich, and Pat looked at her brother before she opened the second packet.

"Are you sure you don't want any?"

"I don't want any," Kenny replied.

"I'll give mine to him too." Pat opened the packet and fed the rest of the sandwiches to Shag. Then she clasped her hands around her knees and sat staring at the dog.

"Matt isn't dead," she said at last.

"How do you know?" Kenny asked.

"If a dog's master dies, the dog always refuses to eat. Anyway, that's what I've always heard and read." She seemed pleased at herself for this bit of reasoning.

"Probably nothing to it," Kenny grumbled. "Just stuff somebody dreamed up."

"I believe it," Pat replied. "Matt probably told Shag to stay here and wait until he came back and then went off some place." She slid off the stone and slipped an arm around the dog's neck. "See, Shag's not pining away."

"I don't like any part of it," Kenny stated. "And I happen to know more about it than you do."

"I knew you were hiding something; you didn't fool me." Pat grinned.

Kenny looked at her for a minute, and figured he might as well tell her everything. When he got home he was going to tell his father, but still he hesitated telling his sister his idea.

"You're going down the canyon?" Pat asked.

"No," Kenny replied. "If Matt was down there, Shag would be with him. Shag is here at the cabin, so I think Matt got that far."

"Where is he? Where did he go?" Pat asked.

"I don't know," Kenny said. Then he began at the beginning and told Pat everything he had seen and all that had happened, even to his checking the carbine in the saddle house. When he finished, Pat was silent for a minute; she just sat and stared at Shag.

"We'd better go back and tell Dad everything," she said.

"I don't think Tex had anything to do with whatever has happened to Matt," Kenny said stubbornly. "The whole thing will be cleared up."

"But Dad will have to ask Tex what he did when he rode away from the ranch. That's the first thing to do." Pat jumped to her feet. "And I think we should take Shag home with us."

Kenny got to his feet too; he was eager to get started. He had hoped they would find Matt Milner, but now there wasn't anything to do but get home as fast as possible.

Pat caught hold of Shag's collar. He stood beside her looking up into her face eagerly, but when she tried to lead him toward Reddy he broke away and returned

to the doorstone. Kenny gathered up Buck's reins and whistled to the dog, but Shag didn't move. Pat tried coaxing, still the dog refused to stir.

They mounted and sat looking at the dog. He had settled down on the doorstone again, his head on his paws. Kenny rode a short distance, then whistled; Shag's ears lifted, but he didn't move.

"No use, he won't leave," Kenny admitted.

"He's sure Matt will come for him," Pat said hopefully.

"We'll have to come back again and bring some food for him," Kenny said. "He'll probably give up if Matt doesn't return within a few days."

"We can come up tomorrow," Pat replied.

As they rode into the timber, they looked back and saw the dog still lying at the cabin door. He was watching them, but hadn't moved. Kenny took the ridge trail, keeping to the open backbone that sloped downward. When they were well down the ridge, Kenny swung north into the rolling hills below the ranch, and came upon a wood road that led from the ranch to the mouth of Crystal Canyon.

"We'll waste an hour following the road," Pat protested.

"Dad won't be home until evening anyway," Kenny said. He wasn't sure just why he wanted to follow the old road, unless it was because it was the route Matt had taken when he left the ranch.

Buck and Reddy swung along at an easy lope on the old road. Kenny noticed at once that it had recently been used by a horseman. One set of tracks headed up the road, another set headed down.

The timber began to thin as they entered a cut-over area, for the logs for the ranch buildings had been taken from this section of the slope. Looking ahead, Kenny saw a horseman galloping along a half-mile up the road. He caught only a brief glimpse of the horse and rider before they vanished around a low hill, but in that moment he recognized the rider. It was Tex riding in from the foothills below the mouth of Crystal Canyon. Kenny shot a quick glance at Pat; apparently she had not seen the rider. He doubted even if she had noticed the tracks in the road.

When they reached the ranch Kenny saw Tex's horse at the feed rack. The station wagon was parked at the back gate; their father had returned sooner than he was expected. They swung down, and Pat allowed Kenny to strip the saddle off Reddy at the saddle-house door, but she took charge of the mare herself as soon as the saddle was off.

After the horses were rubbed down and fed, Kenny and Pat started toward the house. On the porch Kenny faced his sister.

"This is my job," he announced. "I'll handle it alone."

"You'll let me know what Dad says?"

"Yes," Kenny agreed as they went inside.

Once in the house, Kenny walked straight across the living room to his father's office. Through the open door he could see his father bending over a large ledger. He had his back to the door and did not hear Kenny enter. When Kenny halted beside the desk, his father looked up and smiled.

"Something on your mind, son?" he asked.

Kenny sat down in a chair beside the desk. He began at the beginning and told his story as completely as he could. When he finished, his father sat for a long time looking at the pen he held in his hand. Finally he laid the pen down and leaned back.

"I've known Tex for a long time," he began. "He has a nasty temper and he's proud of his toughness. He has had his heart set on catching the chestnut stallion that bosses the band of wild mares. He probably would have caught him before this if I had allowed him enough time off from work." He smiled at Kenny, who was leaning forward. "I don't think Tex would ambush any man, no matter how angry he was." He got to his feet. "Is Tex in from the range?"

"Yes, I think he's at the bunkhouse." Kenny too had gotten quickly to his feet.

"I'll go and have a talk with him," Mr. Reed said. "If Matt Milner has had trouble, we'll try to find him and help him."

Kenny was so relieved that he wanted to laugh. Then he noticed his father's face was grim. Bob Reed laid a hand on his son's arm.

"I don't think any good will come of talking to anyone about this. I'll tell you exactly what Tex has to say."

With that he picked up his hat and left the office. Kenny walked out into the living room, expecting to find Pat hovering about, but there was no sign of her. He walked to the front window and watched his father as he strode down to the bunkhouse.

Before his father reached the gate Kenny saw Pat come out of the barn and head toward the bunkhouse also. She halted in the path a few yards from the door

and stood looking at it. Kenny frowned as she started toward the door, then he too turned and hurried out through the kitchen and down the back walk. When he reached the gate he saw that Pat had not stopped at the bunkhouse; she was walking swiftly toward the back gate. When Kenny stepped into the open past the lilac bush she smiled eagerly and ran to meet him.

"What did you find out?" she asked.

"Dad is on his way to talk with Tex," Kenny replied. "He promised to tell me what Tex has to say."

"You'll tell me?" Pat asked eagerly.

"Yes," Kenny agreed. He remembered, too late, what his father had said about talking.

"Where are you going now?" Pat questioned.

Kenny did not want to tell her he had been checking on her, so he replied, "Just going down to the saddle house."

"Come back and tell me everything as soon as you talk with Dad," Pat said. "Sure," Kenny agreed impatiently as he stepped past her and hurried down the path.

He was irritated because he had suspected Pat of spying, but she had been thinking of going to the bunkhouse. Probably she had thought of talking to Tex herself, but had changed her mind later.



Chapter 5

DECISION

KENNY WAS SO BUSY with his thoughts that he was inside the saddle house before he saw Tex. Tex was seated on an upended box repairing the webbing on a packsaddle. He glanced up and nodded when Kenny stepped through the door, then went back to his work.

"Thought I'd finish up that cinch," Kenny began lamely.

Tex jerked a strip of wet thong tight and made a hitch around the saddletree, without saying a word. Kenny turned to leave. He took a step toward the door, but before he could reach it, it swung open and his father entered.

"I've been looking for you, Tex," he said, as he

noddod to Kenny. "You may as well stay, son; this concerns you too, in a way."

Tex looked up from his work. "What's up?" he asked abruptly.

"You had a fight with Matt Milner," Bob Reed began.

Tex laid aside the packsaddle and rose to his feet. "I did," he answered gruffly, as the color mounted in his cheeks.

"You took a rifle and rode away after he left?" Bob Reed made the question sound like a statement.

Tex glanced sharply at Kenny, then back at his boss. "I rode up to the upper drift fence," he said. "I got in a couple of shots at that renegade she-wolf."

Kenny was watching his father's face. He and Pat had been riding the upper drift fence that day, but he could read nothing in his father's expression.

"You killed the wolf?" Bob Reed spoke slowly.

"It was a running shot, and I guess I must have missed." Tex's voice had an edge to it and his eyes were beginning to show anger.

"Kenny says Matt Milner's dog is at his cabin, but that Matt has never showed up. I guess you understand why I am asking these questions." Bob Reed frowned as he realized that he had not said exactly what he had intended to say.

Tex half-turned and stared at his boss. "You think I had something to do with his not showing up?" his voice was harsh.

"If you say you were riding the upper fence and shot at a wolf, that's good enough for me. I've known you twenty years, and in all that time I've always known

you to tell the truth," Bob Reed spoke with a note of finality in his voice.

Tex hitched up his chaps and moved to the door, but halted after jerking it open. "Thanks," he said gruffly.

Bob Reed continued to talk as Tex stood in the open doorway. "But Milner seems to have disappeared. He may have met with an accident. We'll have to find him, and if we can't find him we'll have to notify the sheriff's office." He did not raise his voice, but there was a noticeable tightness in it. Tex always knew when his boss was dead serious and would stand for no arguments.

"Don't see any reason to kick up a fuss over that poacher. He'll show up when he gets ready." With that Tex thrust out his jaw and stamped across the yard.

Bob Reed stepped to the door and called after Tex, "If Milner does show up, we'll forget all about this. But we will not have any trouble with him."

Tex halted and swung around. "I'll help look for him," he said grimly. "I'd sure like to meet him again."

Kenny stood beside his father and watched Tex stride away toward the bunkhouse.

"I'll ride with Tex," his father said. "He's in a nasty mood and there might be trouble if he found Milner." First Mr. Reed turned toward the barn, then looked up at the ridge where the sun was swinging low. "We'll have time for a look inside the canyon. When the boys come in you can tell them to ride the foothills." Then he walked over to the bunkhouse and called in through the open door, "We'll hit the trail at once, Tex."

Tex appeared at the door, and they walked back to the saddle house where they saddled their horses in

grim silence. Tex made it very clear he didn't like the idea of going out again that evening.

Kenny had already saddled Buck.

"Work the rough country along the road," his father cautioned him before he and Tex started. "If there's moonlight enough to carry on, you can stay out until you have covered the breaks up to the mouth of the canyon."

Kenny watched them gallop away. He had a feeling the boys would not come in until after the sun had gone down. He didn't remember just how full the moon was and he had a feeling he was out of the hunt. When Pat ran down from the house he was scowling at the ridge above. She caught him by the arm and asked excitedly: "What happened?"

"Dad and Tex are heading up the canyon. I'm to wait for the boys."

"Tex told you where he went, and what he was doing, didn't he?" Pat asked.

"He said he was riding the upper fence and took a couple of shots at a she-wolf." Kenny looked at Pat to see what her reaction would be. For a minute she stared at him, then her fingers tightened on his arm.

"But we were up there too. Dad and I rode all the way up to Cathedral Rock. We followed the drift fence."

"And you didn't meet Tex on the way up or coming back, and you didn't hear a shot?" Kenny spoke slowly, his eyes meanwhile searching Pat's face.

"We could have missed him," Pat answered weakly.

"Yes, that's true. You could," Kenny agreed. But he didn't get much comfort out of the thought. He knew

his father was a keen observer, and would have been on the lookout for stray cows. He also realized that the drift fence was seven miles long and extended cross rugged country. With the new grass tantalizingly short, the cattle would wander far looking for better feed.

"You're going out to help search?" Pat asked him.

"As soon as the boys come in."

"I'd like to go too, but Mother won't let me," Pat said.

"You told Mother?" Kenny frowned at Pat.

"I had to, and she heard you and Dad talking in the office."

"We may be out late," Kenny said. "This is a man's job." He grinned as Pat's eyes started to flash with anger.

"I could do as well as you can," she countered.

Kenny didn't want to continue the argument. "What worries me is Shag," he said, shifting the subject to safer ground. "Why is he staying up there at the cabin? You'd think Matt ordered him to stay there, and then he vanished into thin air himself."

At that moment Oats, Elmo, and Hank galloped into view from below the barn. They were racing to see who would reach the corral first. Elmo was waving his hat and whooping as his horse pushed out ahead of the others.

"Elmo always wins," Pat remarked as she and Kenny watched the race.

— Her brother nodded as he started toward the corral to lead Buck out into the open. The horses slid to a halt and the boys piled off, ready for a hot supper after a day in the saddle. Kenny greeted them with news that made them scowl.

"We have to go out and look for Matt Milner," he said. "Dad and Tex are heading up the canyon. We'll ride the foothills."

"What's happened to Matt?" Elmo asked.

"His dog is at the cabin, but he hasn't showed up," Kenny explained.

Oats slapped his hat across his leg, then put it back on his head, and looked sharply at Kenny. "Could be an all-night job," he said sourly. "We ought to eat first."

Hank looked up at the ridge to the west, where now there was only a red glow to show where the sun had been an hour before. "Might as well eat and grain our horses first. There won't be any moon up for two hours," he said.

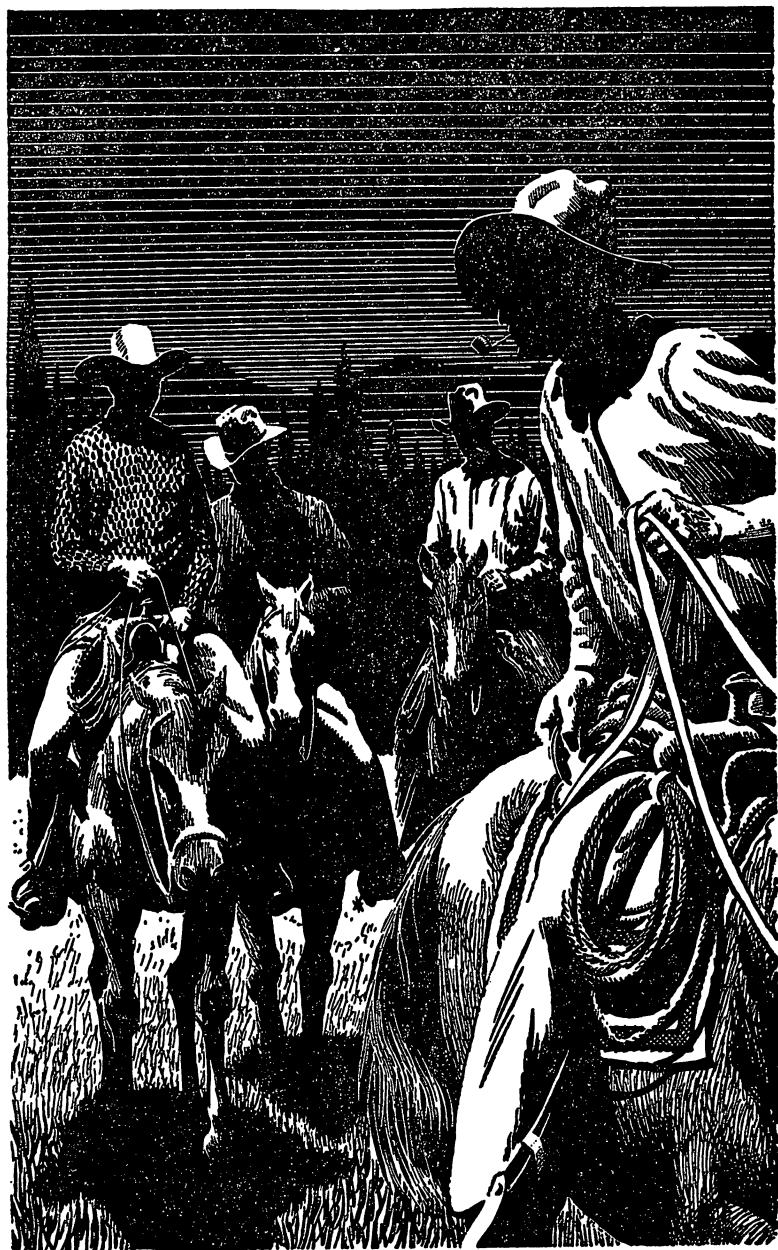
"I got an idea there's no need to rush," Elmo added. Then he looked at Pat. "But I'm ready to go right out," he offered quickly.

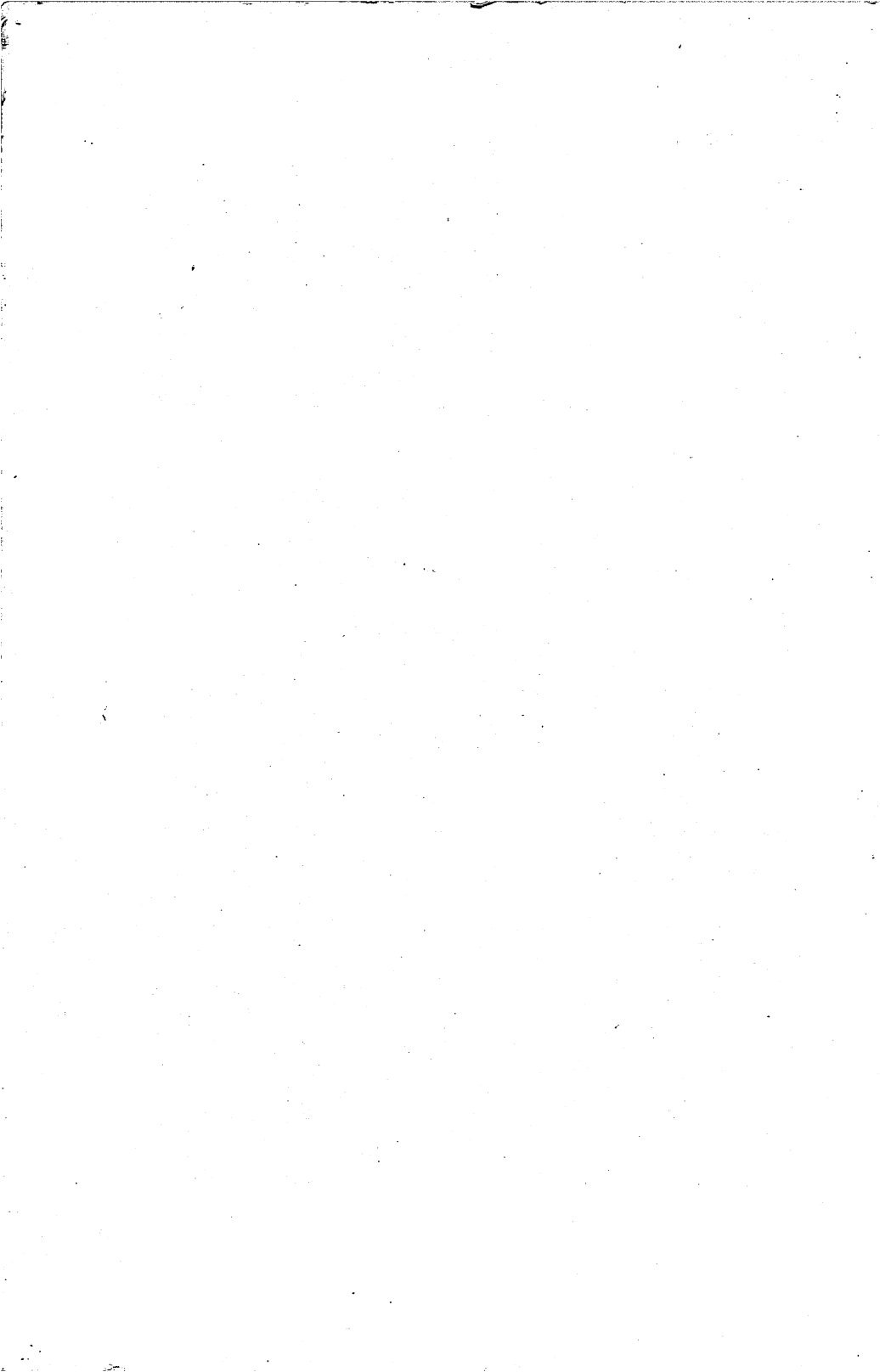
"What do you mean, no need to rush?" Pat asked sharply.

Elmo shrugged his shoulders and looked down at his scuffed boot. "Nothing much," he replied.

"We'll eat first," Kenny decided, turning to Pat. "Run up to the house and tell Mother we'll be in for supper as soon as the boys take care of their horses."

When they sat down to supper, Kenny was sure the boys would question him further, but Hank had nothing to say, and Oats asked only a couple of questions. Elmo, on the other hand, made up for the others by keeping up a barrage of questions, but Kenny told him only what was necessary. He said nothing about the fight back of the barn or of Tex's story about the wolf. The wolf story would have sounded pretty thin





anyhow, because they all knew that there was only one wolf left in that part of the country. She had been hunted and shot at so many times that she was seldom seen, certainly almost never during the day.

Later, when they were getting ready to leave on the search, Elmo dropped a broad hint as to what he thought. "Could be Tex knows where to find Matt Milner," he said to Oats as they moved away from the corral.

The moon was less than an hour high when they spread out on each side of the old road to search the arroyos and patches of timber. Before they separated, Oats made a suggestion.

"All we can do is to scatter out and try to cover all the arroyos and gullies. Holler some, and listen a lot." He looked across at Hank.

"I figure all we'll do is put in our time anyway," Hank said, nodding his approval of Oats's suggestion.

They started off in four directions, Kenny riding between Elmo and Oats. At intervals the men moved, shouted Matt's name, then they would listen. Kenny too followed their example and when he was working dense thickets he watched Buck's ears; sometimes Buck would spot a strange object before Kenny himself would see it and would twitch his ears.

The shouts of the men faded out as Kenny worked his way higher up the slope along a narrow ravine. There didn't seem to be much hope of finding Matt so far from the trail, but he had an idea Matt might have avoided the road after having had trouble with Tex. When he reached the brush-choked head of the ravine he pulled Buck to the right, heading him up

a steep bank. Buck halted suddenly and planted his feet so firmly that Kenny had to press his knees against the horse to keep from going over the saddle horn. Buck was staring at a thicket on the steep slope, his ears pricked forward, his nostrils flaring. Kenny leaned forward over the saddle and strained to see what had startled his horse. At that moment a tawny body flashed out of the thicket and came hurtling down into the ravine in a twenty-foot leap. Buck lunged to one side as the body passed him and started fighting to get free rein so he could charge away.

"Easy, Buck, easy, boy," Kenny cried. "It's only a cougar."

The lank animal vanished into another thicket, sending stones rolling down behind it into the bed of the ravine. Buck snorted and reared, smashing out with his forefeet, but Kenny managed to keep the horse's head up, as he talked quietly to him. He wanted to check the thicket above, for he had an idea that they had surprised the lion at a kill. Buck humped his back and pranced, but did not start to pitch because he could not get his head down. After a while he calmed down and let Kenny guide him up the slope.

As they neared the thicket from which the cougar had leaped, Buck began to rear and plunge again. Kenny swung him upwind away from the cat smell and eased him in close to the thicket. Inside the thicket Kenny found that the brush was trampled down in a small circle. On the ground lay a dark form, sprawled out in a crumpled heap. Kenny bent forward on Buck and peered down into the dimly lighted thicket. The first thing he saw was a leg thrust out at one side of

a body. Then he saw a white patch that gleamed dully, and he knew what lay in the thicket. The cougar had killed a doe. She had gone down on her belly, and her neck must have been broken by a powerful wrench from the forepaws of the killer, for her head was twisted around to the side. Kenny gasped. Lying there in the shadows, the carcass had looked very much like the body of a man.

Quickly he turned Buck away from the kill. It did not take Buck long to put distance between himself and the cat smell. As a colt on the open range he had learned that his most dangerous enemy was the cougar, who loved horse meat better than any other kind of flesh.

Breaking over a low ridge, Kenny headed down another ravine and an hour later met Elmo on the old road. Elmo sat on his horse, a leg hooked around his saddle horn, and was gazing up at the moon. When Kenny pulled up alongside him, Elmo turned.

"Find anything?" he asked.

"We jumped a cougar with a kill," Kenny replied. "Did you see anything?"

"No. The way I figure it, there isn't anything to find."

"He couldn't just vanish," Kenny said.

"Why not?" Elmo asked tersely.

Kenny didn't answer that question; he was listening to the beat of horse's hoofs. A few minutes later Hank rode up. Without saying anything, he filled and lighted his pipe. Elmo yawned, for there wasn't any use asking Hank if he had found anything. In a few minutes Oats appeared also and pulled up beside Hank. He started to make himself a cigarette. After he had crimped it

and lighted it he said to the group, "We may as well head for home. It's getting too dark. This job needs daylight."

Kenny knew he was really in charge of the search, but he did not protest when the boys swung their horses around and headed for the ranch at a trot.

It did not take them long to care for their horses, and as soon as they were finished, the boys headed for the bunkhouse. Kenny walked slowly toward the house. He was sure Pat would be waiting for him, although the clock in the kitchen read ten minutes past eleven. And sure enough, Pat hopped off the stool near the window as he tossed his hat on the drainboard of the sink.

"Did you find anything?" she asked him excitedly.

"Nothing; not a thing."

Pat stood for a moment looking at Kenny before she spoke, as if she thought he might not be telling her all he knew. "Let's go into the living room. I put on an extra log, so the fire is still going in the fireplace."

In the living room the girl sank into a big chair. "I'm supposed to go to bed. Mother has been in bed an hour, but I wanted to wait for you."

"You can go if you want to," Kenny said.

"I guess I better; I see there's nothing I can do to help." Pat was so sleepy that her eyes drooped. "You going to wait for Dad and Tex?"

Kenny nodded. After Pat left the room, he went into the kitchen to get a bottle of milk from the refrigerator. He heard Pat's door click shut as he filled a glass. He carried the milk back to the living room and sat down before the fire to wait for his father.

When Bob Reed entered the living room at two o'clock in the morning, he was surprised to find the lights on and to see Kenny curled up asleep in the big chair in front of the fireplace. He shook the boy gently to waken him.

"You better get to bed," he said gruffly.

Kenny sat up, blinking the sleep out of his eyes. "Did you find him?" he asked eagerly.

"Not a trace of him, but we could easily have missed him. There isn't much light in that canyon, you know. But if he's alive we would have found him, I'm certain of that."

"You went clear through the canyon to the cabin?" Kenny asked.

"Yes we did. The dog was at the cabin, but there wasn't a sign of Milner. That dog doesn't like Tex, that's one thing sure." Bob Reed shook his head. "It's a strange business; I can't understand what's happened."

Kenny pulled himself out of the chair. He had a hunch both he and his father were thinking along the same lines. He was sure they both felt that Matt was at the cabin or at least somewhere near it.

"Tomorrow maybe we can do a better job," his father said.

"Will you call the sheriff?" Kenny asked.

"We'll spend a few days looking for Matt," his father answered. "If he's unharmed, we'd look foolish making a big fuss over him. But you get along to bed; you should have been there hours ago."

Kenny went up to bed and was asleep long before his father had stopped rattling pans in the kitchen below.



Chapter 6

WITNESS

THE NEXT DAY the search for Matt Milner really got under way. Regular daily riding was neglected until further notice, for Bob Reed had ordered his men to find Matt Milner. Kenny and Pat were left to do as they pleased, but the ranch hands were each given a section of the upper country to search.

Kenny had no clear plan in mind, and Pat had no suggestions, but she saw to it that her brother didn't leave the ranch without her. Kenny was impatient because he had been delayed an hour while Pat finished some work for their mother. Once started, they headed straight for the cabin in Pine Valley, with a bag of scraps for Shag.

Kenny pushed the pace so fast that Reddy began to

blow and to lag behind. Pat finally called out to him, "Slow up a bit; Reddy can't take it."

Kenny pulled Buck in and waited for her. When Pat caught up with him, she asked anxiously, "Why are you in such a hurry?"

Kenny shrugged his shoulders in lieu of an answer. He didn't know himself why he was so impatient to reach the cabin, but he had a feeling that he should get there as quickly as possible.

"I don't know; just a hunch, I guess," he replied.

Pat touched Reddy with her spurs and both of them moved on without wasting more time. After that she did not argue about the fast pace, although Reddy did object to being pushed. The going was easier for the horses after they once started down through the timber. Kenny sent Buck through the last spruce stand at a gallop, but Reddy dropped behind, unable to hold the fast pace. As Buck galloped through the balsam grove, Kenny saw that his hunch had been right.

There was Tex, standing in the space before the cabin, his Colt revolver drawn. Shag faced him with bared fangs, and he was growling savagely. The scruff along his neck was standing on end and he seemed ready momentarily to leap at Tex. Tex raised his revolver just as Kenny shouted, "Don't shoot!"

Still holding his gun in position, Tex moved back and turned around. He scowled at Kenny as the horse galloped toward him.

Kenny slid from his saddle. "Put that gun away," he snapped. He was angry, and he didn't try to hide his anger.

Tex stared at the boy in surprise. This was the first

time that Kenny Reed had ever given him a direct order. Tex had been the one to give the orders, and Kenny had obeyed them.

For a moment Tex hesitated, then he slid the six gun into its holster.

"I aimed to have a look inside the cabin," he said quietly and evenly.

Kenny gave the gun in Tex's holster a long look. It had been years since any of the Lazy Y hands had packed a six gun. Then he looked Tex in the eye.

"Why the gun?" he asked.

Tex shrugged his shoulders before he answered. "I had a hunch I might need it, and I was right."

"You don't need it," Kenny said. "I'll take you into the cabin." With that he stepped forward and laid a hand on Shag's head. "Down, Shag," he said gently.

The dog dropped to the doorstone. Meanwhile, Tex scowled at the collie. "We'll have to shoot him anyway," he said sourly. "He'll be worse than any wolf, once he starts running."

"We won't have to shoot him. If we don't find Matt, I'll take him to the ranch," Kenny answered as he caught the latch thong and opened the door. Then he stepped back to let Tex enter.

Pat rode up and slid to the ground just as Tex edged past Shag and entered the cabin. She paused to pat Shag's head; then she followed them inside.

"I thought you were supposed to work the canyon," she said sharply to Tex.

Tex's weather-beaten face flushed. "I was going to, but the dog is here," he replied, "so I thought this was a good place to look."

"You can go ahead and look," Pat said. "I'm going to feed Shag."

Tex went over the cabin carefully. There was no place where anyone could hide except under the bunk or under the floor boards. Tex looked under the bunk and checked the floor planking. Every plank seemed to be nailed down securely, and apparently none of them had been moved. Since they couldn't find anything wrong, they went outside where they found Pat feeding Shag. The dog must have been hungry, for he was eating eagerly.

Tex frowned as he strode around the cabin, with Kenny following him. They searched the brush and the near-by timber, but after an hour of tramping they gave up. There were no tracks or other signs that Matt had reached the cabin.

When they returned to the cabin, Shag was again lying on the doorstep. He bristled when Tex approached him. Pat was nowhere to be seen, so they sat down to wait for her to return. Kenny sat beside the dog and Tex seated himself on a sawed log well away from the animal.

"I'll coax Shag away from here. I'm going to take him to the ranch," Kenny said. "He's a valuable dog."

"He may be valuable, but he's mean," Tex said. "We'll wind up by shooting him." He got to his feet and walked to the tree where his horse was hitched. "Well, I guess I'll be getting along," he said as he mounted and headed toward the canyon mouth.

In a short while Pat returned and seated herself beside Shag. "Where's Tex?" she asked.

"He went down the canyon," Kenny answered.

"Shag hates Tex," she said.

"And Tex hates Shag," Kenny added.

"If Shag could only talk, we'd know a lot more than we do now," Pat observed as she rumbled the dog's ears.

Kenny didn't feel as if this observation needed an answer; all he did was snap at a dry twig with his quirt. But he kept wondering if Tex had ridden to the cabin with the idea of getting rid of the dog. He knew that Tex had visited the cabin with their father the night before, and it was likely that they had looked inside. It seemed Shag was friendly with everyone but Tex.

"Dad told Tex to ride the canyon. I was right there when he gave the boys their orders," Pat began.

"Tex must have had the same hunch we had or else he wouldn't have come here," Kenny said, not wanting Pat to start on any wild plotting.

"Matt isn't here and he never did get here," Pat decided, as she got to her feet, "I wish we could persuade Shag to go home with us."

"We may as well ride back home," Kenny said impatiently. "The boys probably have located Matt by this time." They both knew that none of the men had expected to find Matt Milner alive and unharmed. It was just a matter of finding him and learning what had happened to him.

Pat tried to coax Shag to follow her, but he would not leave the doorstone; Kenny made an attempt also, with no better luck. Finally they rode away and left the dog to continue his vigil. They took the lower trail and headed into the hills below the mouth of the canyon. On the way down they came upon Elmo, seated in the sun on a bald knob overlooking the river. His

horse was nibbling blades of grass near by, while he dozed, his hat brim pulled down over his eyes.

"Hi, lazy bones!" Pat called to him.

Elmo shoved back the hat and grinned at Pat. He yawned and flexed his arms over his head. It was evident he had been dozing for some time.

"Hi!" he greeted her in return.

"You seem to be working hard," Kenny laughed.

"We're wasting a lot of time; that's what we're doing," Elmo answered.

"Didn't you find any trace at all?" Pat asked.

"A few boot tracks that could be his." Elmo took off his hat and ran his fingers through his black hair.

"I don't think he got as far as the canyon," he spoke softly, as his eyes wandered out across the valley.

"He couldn't just vanish," Pat said impatiently. "There have to be some traces of him."

"Looks like he did," Elmo plucked a straw and began to chew on it, but he offered no further explanation.

"How about the others?" Kenny asked.

"Don't know," Elmo replied laconically. "I've just been sittin' thinkin' mostly."

"You don't seem to think there's any use looking, that's it, isn't it?" Pat stated impatiently.

Elmo frowned. He didn't want Pat to be angry with him, so all he said was, "I just don't think we'll find him."

Kenny didn't like the direction Elmo's talk was taking. In another minute he would be saying that Tex could clear up the whole thing, so Kenny interrupted suddenly.

"We'll head on down the slope," he said. "Come on, Pat."

Pat and he rode away, but Pat didn't say anything until they had reached the old road. When they turned up the road toward home, she looked across at Kenny.

"If Tex hadn't been so bossy and tough with the boys, they wouldn't be thinking things about him," she said.

"Tex has always been fair with the men," Kenny replied.

"But he's never really been friendly with anyone," she continued. "If it was Oats or Hank, they wouldn't be thinking the things they do."

Kenny knew Pat was right. Tex was a good range boss, and he saw to it that each man did his share of the work and did it right. As long as a man did not cross Tex, there was no trouble, but he was a hard boss who had never made friends with his men.

During the days that followed, some of the men were always detailed to the upper country and the search continued. No clues were found; it seemed that Matt Milner had simply vanished. Pat and Kenny managed to feed Shag, but they weren't able to persuade the dog to leave the cabin. However, they did coax him to take short runs with them into the meadow, but afterwards he always returned to the stone in front of the cabin door.

On the evening of the fourth day, while all the boys were in the living room, Bob Reed telephoned the sheriff. He explained that Matt Milner had come into the high country and suddenly seemed to have disappeared. The sheriff promised he would check in

Placer to see if Matt had returned to town. It was his belief that Matt had hired a couple of men to work for him, and he was sure he could locate these fellows at one of the rooming houses.

The sheriff called back after supper as he had promised. Pat and Kenny were reading by the fire, but the men had all gone to the bunkhouse. Bob Reed did most of the listening this time. The sheriff's interest had increased a great deal in the interim. He told Mr. Reed he had talked to the two men Matt had hired to help him round up the horses. Matt, the sheriff said, had realized there would be trouble, and said that if he failed to return to Placer within two weeks they were to come and look for him. Matt, the sheriff went on, mentioned Tex Holland as the man he expected to prove troublesome. The sheriff asked them so many questions about Tex that Bob Reed suggested the officer come out to talk to Tex himself. The sheriff had to make a trip elsewhere the next day, but agreed to ride out to the ranch the following one. When Mr. Reed left the phone, he walked over to the fire and stared at the crackling log.

"Will he arrest Tex?" Pat asked suddenly.

"I don't know," Bob Reed answered shortly.

"We don't have to tell the sheriff anything, do we, Dad?" Pat said quickly.

Bob Reed looked at his daughter for a minute, then back at Kenny, who was pretending to read. "There's been a lot of talk, and Tex has made threats. The sheriff is entitled to know anything that might help him." He regarded Kenny gravely. "When he questions you, Son,

"You must tell him the exact truth. It will be better for Tex that way."

Kenny felt his heart sink; he had hoped that his father would tell the sheriff everything that ought to be told. He didn't want to be questioned.

"I can't tell him much," he said.

Mrs. Reed had come in from the kitchen meanwhile. She looked anxiously at her husband. "Does Kenny have to be involved?" she asked him when she heard that Kenny would be questioned.

"I'm afraid Kenny is the one who will have to answer most of the questions."

Kenny smiled reassuringly at his mother. "I'll answer any questions the sheriff asks," he promised.

"But that will make you a witness if there's a trial," Pat broke in. "Only there couldn't be a trial."

Bob Reed smiled at her. "Why not?" he asked.

"Well, Matt just vanished. They'd have to find a body."

"I think we have a lawyer in the family," her father laughed.

"If they don't find a body, how can they prove Matt is dead? I read that in a mystery book," Pat said.

"Pat," her mother spoke in a shocked voice, "you're letting your imagination run away with you. Please keep still."

Pat didn't say anything more, but she had a superior look on her face that showed she was pleased with herself. She was worried about Tex, though. He was a part of the Lazy Y, even though he had ordered her around the same as he had ordered Kenny. Pat was

loyal, and her loyalty made her willing to cover up for Tex. But Pat wouldn't have to answer the questions.

"You just have to answer the sheriff's questions," Pat said softly to Kenny, as she moved closer to him in front of the fire. "He can't ask about something he doesn't know about."

If her father heard her, he gave no sign of it, for he had a newspaper before him and was deep in his easy-chair.

Kenny got to his feet quickly. "Guess I'll get some air," he said.

Pat didn't follow him outside, for she knew there was no use arguing with him when he set his mouth in such a stubborn line. Kenny closed the door behind him and stood looking up at the stars. The clear, cold air made these seem very close and very large. A big red star hung in the east just above the timber line.

Kenny didn't pause long because he was afraid Pat might decide to follow him. He hurried past the bunk-house and turned toward the spruce timber above the ranch buildings. The spring night was chilly, but not cold enough for frost.

Kenny seated himself near the woods, picking a spot close to a thicket of buck brush where there was a large, flat rock. It was a natural thing for him to do because he was trained to the outdoor life. He was like the wild dwellers of the high country in many ways. When he sat down to rest at night he picked a sheltered spot, where he would be able to see but would not be seen, unless he moved. Tonight he was not watching for prowlers, but nevertheless he did not move.

A doe sprang out of the spruce cover and into the

meadow. She was less than a hundred feet from Kenny, but she was upwind and did not smell him. She stood with her big ears propped forward, looking over the open meadow and listening, evidently carefully checking the night sounds and smells. After a long minute of watchfulness she dropped her head and started feeding. Kenny could hear the click of her teeth as she nibbled the grass.

A twig snapped close to where he sat. Instantly the doe jerked up her head. An animal was moving through the thicket toward the meadow. More twigs snapped, and a stone rolled down the slope. The doe dropped her head again; she was not afraid. She knew by the sounds what sort of animal was approaching. A moment later the quilly back of a porcupine appeared. In a moment the dull-witted gnawer of bark ambled into the open only a few feet away from Kenny.

Kenny turned his head. The porky had smelled him. It sniffed and grunted, then moved toward him. In spite of his worries Kenny grinned. Porky had smelled his boots and would march right up to him and start making a meal off the leather if Kenny didn't soon move. Many times while sleeping out and using his saddle as a pillow he had been wakened by a porcupine that had decided to make a meal off his boots or his saddle. Kenny let the quilly one get within a foot of him, then he stood up.

The porcupine halted and blinked. Out in the meadow the doe whirled and bounded toward the woods. Kenny looked down at his visitor.

"Get going, quill pig," he said.

Disregarding orders, the porcupine did not move,

so Kenny started walking away. Like the skunk, the quilly one had come to know he was perfectly safe from attack. Other animals avoided him. Once in a while an ignorant dog might try to worry him, but such an enemy soon learned his lesson, for Porky had a way of getting rid of nuisances.

Kenny felt better for the time he had spent sitting at the edge of the meadow, for he liked to get away alone and sit with only the wild life and the night sounds around him. No matter what his trouble was, it could be helped by his wandering off alone at night provided he did not go beyond the spruce timber.

With much of the tightness gone from his body, he walked slowly back toward the ranch house.



Chapter 7

NIGHT RIDE

A FULL MOON had risen above the mountains before Kenny got back to the ranch. He paused outside the horse corral, not knowing exactly why he did not want to go up to his room to bed. Tension and uneasiness were building up inside him once more, and he was sure he would not be able to go to sleep. Out in the corral Buck lifted his head to stare at Kenny. With a warning snort the pony shoved his head back into the rack and started to munch hay. He wanted to give Kenny fair warning that he didn't care to go riding so late at night.

Kenny started to turn away from the corral gate, but halted to listen as a high, lonesome call floated down from a ridge above. There was no mistaking that call;

it was the call of the lone she-wolf, and it made cold prickles start at the base of Kenny's spine. At the beginning it was much like the hoot of a horned owl; then it developed into two long, mournful notes, while the ending was a series of barks and howls. In the stillness of the night the call seemed to come from somewhere above the ranch, but Kenny knew that the call of a wolf carries a long way, that the gray killer was probably miles away on a ridge above Pine Valley.

As he looked out across the meadow below the barn, he could see the willow clumps and even the rocks clearly in the white moonlight, but he knew that light was deceptive and would not be clear enough for shooting unless at very close range. A careful rider might sight the old wolf and even get close enough for a shot if she kept on howling. Kenny was in a mood for riding, and the wolf cry stirred a desire to go and look for her. There was something about her howl that disturbed him. It could be a mating call, or it might be a signal that the killer had sighted game and was closing in for the kill. Kenny knew that if it were game she had sighted, it was likely to be one of the Lazy Y calves or a short yearling steer. The fact that she was howling at all was unusual, and the thought that she might be bent on raiding the ranch herd made Kenny turn quickly toward the saddle house.

He did not have to turn on a light to get his saddle because it always hung on a peg just inside the door. Swinging it across his shoulder, he returned to the corral and opened the gate. Buck was far from pleased at the prospect of a night ride and backed away, snorting and flattening his ears when Kenny approached

him, but he did not force Kenny to rope him. When the saddle was cinched tight and the bit was in his mouth, Buck quieted down, contenting himself with arching his back and stomping up and down as they moved away from the corral.

As he rode across the home meadow, Kenny took the precaution of sliding his carbine out of its boot and checking the magazine to make sure there were cartridges in it. He caught the glint of moonlight on yellow brass in the breech and the grim thought hit him that suddenly everyone on the Lazy Y except Pat had taken to packing a saddle gun.

Above Crystal Canyon he heard the wolf call again as he skirted the high rim. This time there seemed to be a yearning note in the cry, the final notes ending in an eager whine. Kenny realized that he was waiting for something after the call died away in a faint echo from the cliffs across the canyon. It took him several minutes to decide what he was waiting for, and when he finally realized what it was, his mouth tightened into a thin line. He was waiting to hear an answer to the call because the call had demanded one.

Without thinking, he had pulled Buck to a halt, and as he let the horse have his head again he realized that in all of this wild country the only answer that could come was one from the cabin in Pine Valley where Shag was keeping his vigil. Kenny was convinced now that the call was a mating cry. This was the time of year when the coyotes were running in pairs, and it would be the time of the mating moon for the she-wolf.

As he rode up the ridge a definite plan began to take

shape in his mind. He wanted to prevent the wolf from killing any Lazy Y stock, and he also meant to stop any possibility of mating between Shag and the she-wolf. If Shag ever started running with the wolf, the dog would be branded as an outlaw and shot. Unlike the killer, he would not be wary and gun-shy and so would come to a sudden end.

Kenny had located the spot from which the wolf was calling before he reached the rims overlooking Pine Valley. He had not, however, solved the problem of getting close enough to her for a shot. Apparently she was depending upon her call to get results, because she had not moved her position since he had first heard her.

If she started moving down into the valley, Kenny had a plan that he thought might work. He could slip into the brush near the cabin, using Shag as a lure. If she approached close enough to the cabin, he might get a shot. Pulling Buck in to a walk, he set a course up the ridge overlooking the valley. In less than a mile the wolf call came twice from the same spot. Kenny began to feel reassured about Shag, because so far the dog had not answered.

When he reached a point a half-mile below the spot from which the wolf was calling, he pulled Buck into the black shadows beneath a spruce tree and dismounted. At night a wolf would be very apt to select an open ledge overlooking the valley as a lookout spot and signal tower. He would have to move carefully now so as not to alarm her. He checked the wind, and found a faint breeze blowing down the ridge, which

would keep her from catching his scent. On the other hand, the sound of Buck's shod hoofs would carry far in the still air.

Ordinarily Kenny would have ground-hitched Buck and let him graze, but he did not want the horse to leave the deep shadows under the spruce, so he hitched him to the tree. Buck jerked at the reins when he discovered that he had been treated like a pack horse.

"Sorry, old man," Kenny said softly as he patted his neck and slid the carbine out of its boot, easing a cartridge into the breech.

After leaving the spruce, he moved slowly and carefully so as not to loosen any rocks or snap any twigs. The scattered trees and shrubs on the ridge afforded cover as he moved upward. Twice he paused, and stood for a long space listening. He had learned the tricks of stalking from watching the cougar, whose first rule was never to hurry and always to look, listen, and test the night air. Kenny's nose wasn't sensitive enough to pick up animal scents, but he had good eyes and ears.

While he stood in the shadows under a pine, the call of the wolf sounded again. This time it seemed very close, so close that Kenny gripped his rifle and peered ahead into a small clearing, expecting at any moment to see the killer seated in the moonlight. As the call drifted away, he realized that the wolf was not so close as he had thought, but nevertheless his spine tingled and his grip on the rifle tightened. Avoiding the clearing, he moved stealthily along in the shadow of a row of bushes until he came to a clump of choke-cherry trees. Then he edged around the grove, and halted to peer into another clearing.

He found himself looking out at a rock-strewn point that jutted out over the rim. There was no cover between him and the naked pile of rocks which rose above the backbone of the ridge, and the distance to the point was a full hundred yards.

Kenny froze into an unmoving shape that he hoped would blend with the black shadows behind him. As he studied the point, he appreciated the cunning of the old wolf. At first he could see nothing that resembled a gray killer because the color of the she-wolf blended so perfectly with the gray rocks. It was the movement of her head as she lifted her muzzle to the stars that betrayed her, and once he had caught the movement he was able to see her very clearly. Her savage, mournful call rang out, and as it ended Kenny could even hear her draw in her breath. It was impossible for him to see his sights, because he was standing in deep shadows, so he started to edge forward to get the moonlight on them. He had taken only two steps when the old she-wolf spotted him, for her eyes were trained to penetrate deep shadows. For a moment she stared at the black mass of shadow cast by the chokecherry trees before she was able to recognize the moving form as that of her deadliest enemy, man.

Like a gray ghost she moved off the flat rock where she had been sitting and vanished completely. Her movements were not fast: she simply melted into the night, and when Kenny strained his ears to catch sounds that would tell him which way she had gone he heard nothing at all, no rattling rocks, no sound of snapping twigs or rustling leaves. He stood listening for a full minute before he moved out into the moonlight.

Then he walked to the pile of rocks and stood looking down over the valley below. His eyes searched the clumps of bushes, the rocks and the trees on the steep slope below the point, in the hope that he might spot the killer. He had an odd feeling that she was standing in some pool of shadow watching him, her jaws sagging in a silent wolf laugh.

He seated himself on the flat rock the wolf had occupied but a few minutes before and continued to watch the slope. From this spot he could see down into Pine Valley, all the way to the lower end where Matt Milner's cabin stood. If there had been a light in the cabin, he would have been able to see that too. He wondered what Shag had thought when he heard the wolf call, whether he had been tempted to answer her or to start up the slope to meet her.

Suddenly Kenny blinked and bent forward. There was a light in Matt's cabin, a pale yellow beam that winked like a star. For a full minute he sat staring at the light, half-expecting it to wink out, and moving his head to make sure it was real. Excitement gripped him, and he got to his feet and hurried down the ridge to the spruce tree where he had tethered Buck.

To urge Buck into a lope down the rocky slope would be dangerous, but Kenny was excited and willing to take the risk. Buck was sure-footed but he was more careless than an older mountain horse would have been, and he was willing to take chances. On the last slope above the valley he decided to break and gallop, for he had begun to feel the excitement in the boy on his back.

The trail was nothing more than a cowpath that

twisted around clumps of bushes and jutting rocks. Buck managed to dodge the obstacles himself, but of course he did not make allowance for Kenny's legs extending out on either side of his body. Bushes tore at Kenny's levis and a big rock gouged his leg, but he still did not pull Buck in.

They had almost reached the open meadow below when Buck miscalculated as he tried to dodge a clump of buck brush growing in the middle of the path. Instead of going around the bushes, he crashed into them and stumbled, plunging forward and landing on his knees, his head plowing into the soft earth. In order to prevent Buck from rolling on him, Kenny jumped out of the saddle sidewise and head first. He landed on his shoulder and rolled over twice before he could stop.

When he sat up he flexed his arms to see if his shoulder were injured. It felt numb, but he could work his arms, so he turned halfway round to look for Buck. The horse stood a few yards away, his head down. He was rolling his eyes and snorting like a wild horse.

Kenny got slowly to his feet and walked toward Buck. He was badly shaken but he wasn't hurt. His only thought was that this would delay him in getting to the cabin. As Kenny approached him, Buck jerked up his head and backed away, dragging his reins.

"Cut out the foolishness," Kenny called impatiently.

Buck shook his bridle reins and backed up again. It was clear that he blamed Kenny for the mishap and that his uncertain temper was going to make him hard to handle. Kenny increased his speed, knowing that Buck would either stop or whirl and bolt. Buck decided

to stop and wait to be caught, and as Kenny gathered up the reins, he started to laugh. He had suddenly realized that the charge down the slope was a piece of foolishness.

"If Matt's bedded down in that cabin, he'll be there when we ride up," he said to himself, "so we'll just take it easy."

The instant he hit the saddle he pulled Buck's head up, for he did not want to spend a half-hour taming a bucking horse. Buck tried to get his head down, and when he failed he humped his back and did a few crow hops before settling down to an easy trot.

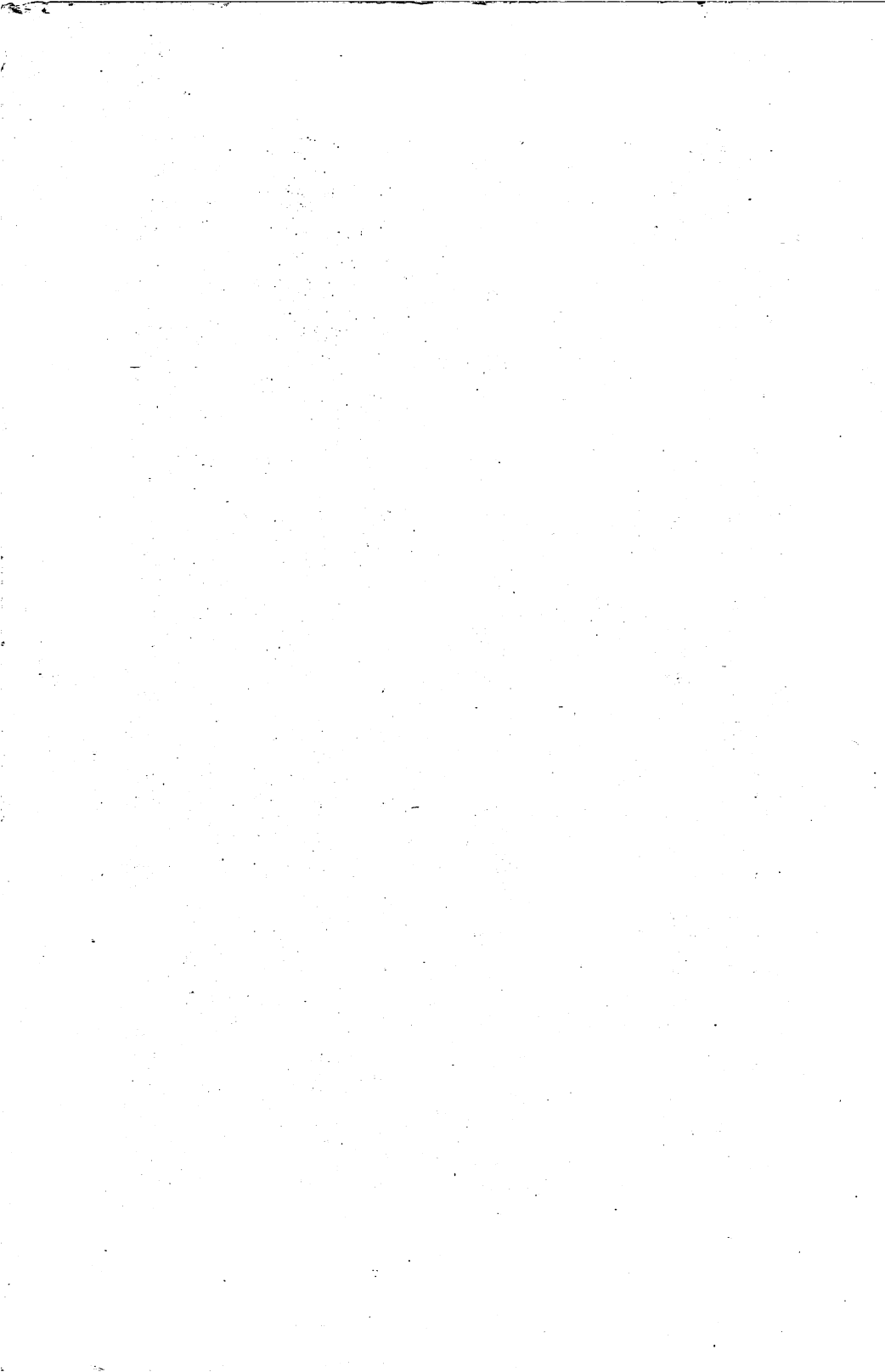
Heavy timber hid the cabin from view, but Kenny was over his first wild impatience and therefore held Buck's pace down. At first he didn't see any light in the cabin, but then he was approaching it from the front, where none would have shown anyway. As he drew nearer, he was positive he saw a glimmer; he whistled to Shag, but received no response. When he was close enough to see the building, he realized that the dog was not lying on the doorstone. Instead of this fact disturbing him, it built up his hopes, because he was sure now that Matt would let the dog sleep inside the cabin with him.

As he swung down from his saddle, Kenny faced the door and called loudly, "Matt!"

When he received no answer he started to walk toward the door, but came to a sudden halt when he saw that it was standing wide open. "Matt!" he called again, almost shouting this time.

When there was no response even to his shout, he moved to the open doorway and felt in his pocket for





matches. He struck a match on the door casing and held the flame above his head. The wavering light lighted the cabin dimly, but well enough to show Kenny that there was no one in the big room.

As he entered he lighted another match, moving meanwhile to the center of the room. An eerie feeling gripped him as he looked around. Nothing except the bunk seemed to have been changed since he had last visited the place. However, the dry boughs looked as if they had been disturbed; someone might have pulled them aside and then dropped them back into place. He examined the table and the stove as well as the cupboard in a corner, using several more matches in the experiment. He found the cupboard door open, but he could not be sure that it had not been that way when he had last checked over the room.

Closing the door behind him, he stood listening and thinking for a moment. He couldn't have been mistaken about the light; he was sure he had seen it, and it seemed reasonable to believe that it had been made by Matt. Shag was not at the cabin, a situation that gave weight to this conclusion. He recalled that he and Pat had been unable to get the dog to leave the vicinity, but he could and would probably have gone away with Matt. Kenny decided that Matt had visited the cabin, possibly to get Shag and then had gone on to a camp he had built in the rough country above and on the far side of the valley. Once they found Matt's camp, Kenny felt that Matt's reason for leaving Shag would be explained.

He was disappointed because he had not found Matt, but he felt good, too, because he now would have good

news to report; tomorrow he and some of the boys could ride up into the rough country to locate Matt's camp. Likewise he was sure Tex would be happy over his discovery. As he thought about it, he became more and more eager to get back to the ranch, so he mounted Buck and headed for home.

He was moving slowly up through the heavy timber when he heard the wolf call again. This time it came from the valley below him, and seemed different. There was the same chilling savagery in it, but it ended in a series of eager yelps as if the killer were greeting a friendly prowler she had met. The tone of her call made Kenny uneasy. Since she had invaded the Lazy Y range she had seldom howled at night but had played the silent phantom, striking down a calf on the lower range one night, making a kill on the upper mesas the next night. But the more Kenny thought about it, the more convinced he was that Shag was in some way or other connected with the she-wolf calls.

It was three o'clock in the morning before Kenny reached the ranch. There was not a light to be seen, and the buildings loomed like huge masses of shadow, because the moon had set. He decided he'd better wait until morning to break the news, so he dismounted and led Buck into the barn. Here he lighted a lantern so that he could see if the horse had been injured by his fall. Buck had skinned both knees and had a few scratches on his muzzle, but otherwise he was not hurt. Kenny rubbed salve over the skinned knees, then turned Buck into the corral.

Silently he let himself into the kitchen and climbed the back stairs to his room.



Chapter 8

BIG SURPRISE

KENNY'S MOTHER did not waken him the next morning at the usual hour, so he slept soundly until a band of sunlight swept through the room and across his face. After he had gotten his eyes open and remembered what had happened the night before, he sat up in bed. A dull twinge of pain in his shoulder made him fully aware of the soreness and stiffness in his muscles. He was carefully flexing his arm to get the stiffness out of it when he noticed the time. Whew! It was already five minutes past nine. Quickly tossing aside the covers, he jumped out of bed, momentarily forgetting his aches and pains.

A quick look out of his window told him that the men had already gone; the only horses left in the corral

were Reddy and Buck. He looked back at the alarm clock and frowned because he had forgotten to set it before he went to bed. As he dressed he listened for sounds in the kitchen below his room. Pat must be about, since Reddy was in the corral. He thought of trying to slip out of the house without meeting her, but decided against it because he was hungry; besides, he'd need a lunch packed if he rode into the high country.

As he started down the stairs he began to think that this was ~~not~~ the way he had planned to break the news about the light he had seen in Matt's cabin. He had planned on telling it at breakfast with everyone present, but now he might just as well tell Pat first. After all, that might be the best way. He had already decided not to say very much about the she-wolf and her howling, for he was afraid his father would associate the incident with Shag. He himself wanted a free hand to work with the dog.

Pat was in the kitchen when he entered, and Kenny knew immediately that she had been waiting for him.

"What happened to you last night?" she asked without waiting for him to speak. "Mother was worried when you didn't come in, and Buck's knees are a sight."

Kenny grinned and decided to hold out just to tease her. "Are they skinned?" he queried, pretending to be surprised.

"Elmo says you must have taken a bad fall." Pat had no intention of being stalled. "Where did you go?"

"I'll be too busy to talk if I have to cook my own hot cakes," Kenny lifted the lid on the batter bowl and peeped in to see if there was any batter left.

"Sit down. I'll make your cakes—you can talk."

Kenny sat down at the kitchen table and reached for the milk jug. After he had poured a glass of milk he watched Pat pour batter on the griddle, then he started to talk.

"I couldn't sleep, so I rode up to Pine Valley."

"How come you were running Buck at night?" Pat lifted the edge of a cake with the turner to see if it was brown on the underside.

"I was in a big hurry to get down to Matt's cabin." Kenny grinned tantalizingly, taking a long drink of milk before going on with his story. "I saw a light in the window."

Pat almost dropped the cake turner, and her eyes opened very wide. "A light?"

Kenny nodded. "I watched it a long time to be sure."

"Then you've found Matt?" Pat forgot the cakes as she crossed to the table and bent over Kenny.

"No. When I got down there, after taking a spill, there was no one there."

Pat wrinkled her forehead in thought for a few moments, then she beamed down at Kenny. "Then he does have a camp in the hills above Pine Valley."

"Could be. Hey, my cakes!" Kenny got to his feet.

Pat hurriedly turned back to the stove. When she flipped one of the cakes, it was done to a deep brown color, too well done to be tasty. "I'll cook another batch. Won't take a minute. Have you told anyone?"

"Those will do, I like 'em brown," Kenny grinned. "No, I haven't told anyone."

"We could ride up there and find Matt. It would be a terrific surprise." Pat was excited.

"It would take several days to comb that country," Kenny said. "I think the whole crew should work at it, not just us two."

"Was Shag there?" Pat asked suddenly.

"No."

"That clinches it," Pat stated triumphantly, as she slid the plate of cakes across to Kenny.

"The old she-wolf was trying to coax him into following her. She kept calling to him. That was why I rode up there." Kenny reached for the sirup jar.

"Shag wouldn't run with a wolf." Pat was positive about that. "Not when he was with Matt."

Mrs. Reed called to Pat from the living room, so she had to leave, but she paused at the door and turned to face Kenny. "You won't run off and leave me?"

"No," Kenny promised. "And you better fix two lunches. We might be out late."

Pat did not come back and Kenny did not see her again before leaving the house. When he entered the corral Buck regarded him without enthusiasm, but he did let Kenny doctor his knees. The damage to them wasn't great, but Kenny knew that Buck would be stiff for several days. By the time Pat appeared at the corral gate he had Buck and Reddy saddled and ready to go.

"Where are the men riding?" he asked as he tucked his packet of sandwiches into a saddle pocket.

"Dad insisted upon searching the country below the mouth of the canyon again, so that's where they are now," Pat answered as she swung into her saddle.

They rode across the meadow at a fast trot, with Buck taking the lead after he had worked the stiffness out of his legs. Following the old wood road, they then

headed toward the canyon. When they were well up into the foothills Kenny guided his horse to a high point from which they could check the countryside. Halting on a ridge, they sat looking down upon the hills below the mouth of the canyon. After a considerable wait Kenny spotted the riders working the country below. They had spread out to cover all the land they passed over, and Kenny spied Tex on a ridge far to the right of the others.

"Let's cut across and meet them," he suggested with a nod toward the far slope.

Pat had been busy with her own thoughts meanwhile and had kept very quiet. She was sure that the mystery was about to be solved, and now she had started to worry about what would happen if Tex and Matt met. As she and Kenny cantered down the slope, Kenny called to her, "You take the east ridge and I'll take the one to the west; that way we'll be sure not to miss any of them."

Pat nodded her head and swung off to the right. Kenny headed Buck toward the ridge where he had spotted Tex. Pat's idea was to meet Elmo and then tell the others, but Kenny wanted to break the news to Tex himself. He felt that he had a few things to do to reestablish himself with Tex.

Buck set his own pace as he climbed up to the ridge, but after they reached the top Kenny urged him into a lope. It wasn't long before he sighted Tex, who had pulled up beside a stunted pine. When Kenny rode up, he nodded but did not speak.

It was obvious that Tex had not been hunting very hard. He apparently hadn't left the ridge to search

the creek bottom, and his horse showed no sweat marks from hard riding.

"Got some news for you," Kenny plunged in at once.

Tex gave the boy a brief glance before turning his gaze back to the valley below. His answer was a grunt.

"I was up in Pine Valley last night."

"I knew that." Tex spoke gruffly.

"I saw a light in Matt's cabin." Kenny watched Tex's leathery face.

"You trailed me up there?" Tex's eyes shifted and met Kenny's gaze with a hard, level look.

Kenny's mouth dropped open. "You were up there too?" he managed to ask.

Tex nodded.

"Then you must have made the light I saw?" Kenny asked the question, but he already knew the answer before Tex had a chance to nod his head.

"What were you looking for?" Kenny spoke abruptly the first words that came into his mind.

Tex flipped the cigarette he had been smoking onto the ground. His craggy jaw seemed to thrust out a little farther as he gathered up his reins. "The way things are shaping up I figured I'd best do some looking."

"I wasn't following you," Kenny replied sharply. He was beginning to get angry. "I was after the she-wolf."

Tex clucked to his horse. "When you catch up with her you'll also find that dog at her side."

Kenny tried to think of something to say to Tex that would make him feel that he and his father were trying to help him, not condemn him.

"We're all for you, Tex," he tried to assure him.

Tex pulled his horse around without answering and

rode away. He was certainly on the prod, but he could at least have explained his trip to the cabin.

Kenny was roused from his thoughts by a shout from the opposite ridge. Pat and Elmo had pulled up and Elmo was calling to him. Kenny waved to them and straightway headed Buck down into the creek bottom. He realized now he had made it look worse for Tex by telling Pat about the light in the cabin. By this time she would have told their father and the men. To add to the misunderstanding, Tex thought he had been following him.

He met Pat and Elmo on the far slope. Before he pulled up, Pat called eagerly to him, "We're all riding up to Pine Valley to find Matt's camp."

"There's no use in going up there," he said, pulling Buck to a halt. "Tex was at Matt's cabin last night."

Pat was so surprised and disappointed that she was speechless, but Elmo laughed. "Thought it sounded sort of phony," he said.

"What was Tex doing up there?" Pat asked.

"Looking," Kenny replied laconically.

"Looking for what?" Elmo persisted.

"He didn't say." Kenny was in no mood to be questioned, for he felt pretty low and wanted to get away by himself.

"We'll have to head off Dad and the men," Pat said.

"I hate to tell Dad, because he was all pepped up about the light."

"I'll head them off," Kenny offered, not waiting for an answer, but pulling Buck around and heading him down along the slope.

He caught up with his father in the valley below.

Hank and Oats were riding with him toward the ford near the mouth of the canyon. Kenny's father smiled as horse and boy pulled up beside him.

"Looks like you finally furnished us a break."

Kenny wet his lips. "I've just talked with Tex," he said. "He was at Matt's cabin. It was his light I saw."

There was a long space of silence as the three men considered what Kenny had said. When Kenny's father broke the silence his voice was tight.

"In that case we may as well head back to the ranch."

"I think I'll go up to Pine Valley," Kenny suggested.

"You'll be wasting your time," his father replied impatiently. "Matt never got that far."

Kenny did not argue, but headed down to the ford and crossed the river. He didn't expect to find Matt, but he had to do something about Shag.

It was noon by the time Kenny reached Pine Valley. He had his lunch with him but he wasn't hungry, so he shoved on toward the cabin. As he emerged from the timber into the clearing where the cabin stood, his heart did a quick flip. Shag lay on the doorstep. As soon as he saw Kenny his tail began to thump on the stone.

Kenny rode up to the cabin and dismounted. "Boy, I certainly am glad to see you."

Shag had risen to meet Kenny, his jaws sagging open and his head cocked on one side.

"Hungry?" Kenny asked.

Shag wagged his tail eagerly, but when Kenny stepped away from the cabin to get his packet of lunch from Buck's saddle the dog dropped down on the flat stone again.

Kenny offered a sandwich to Shag. Apparently he

wasn't hungry, for he sniffed at it but refused to take a bite. Kenny sat down beside him on the stone. "You went hunting last night," he said accusingly to the dog.

When Shag refused to share the lunch, Kenny ate both sandwiches himself. He felt better now, because he was certain that if Shag had been running with the wolf he would not have come back for several days, if at all. The problem at the moment, however, was how to get Shag to the ranch where he'd be away from temptation.

Kenny tried to make Shag stand up. The dog seemed to sense that Kenny was leaving and would not get up. So Kenny mounted Buck and whistled, but Shag refused to move. He coaxed and begged, but it did no good. Finally Kenny rode away leaving the dog to keep his vigil. Later he would come back prepared to use force, if necessary, to get Shag away from the cabin.

There wasn't much time left for riding the high country above the valley, but Kenny made a circle through the foothills on the chance that he might discover a trail. However, he found no trace of any human being in the hills or along the small streams that fed into the river. By the time he started to return he had to race Buck hard to make the ranch by suppertime.

Supper that night was a quiet and strained meal. Even Pat was subdued. Mr. Reed had talked with Tex, but Tex had flared up and acted as if they were all working against him. As soon as supper was over and before Pat had finished helping her mother with the dishes, Kenny slipped away, for he wasn't anxious to talk to Pat.



Chapter 9

THE LAW

WHEN KENNY AWOKE the next morning, the sun was streaming in through his window. A yellow-hammer was beating a tattoo on the flagpole in the yard. Kenny stretched out his arms and sniffed at the tantalizing breeze coming in through the window, which unmistakably indicated that his mother was frying bacon for breakfast. He could hear the light plant at the back of the house purring smoothly, which probably meant that his mother had plugged in the waffle iron, because the motor always started when electric current was being used. The delicious aroma of frying bacon and the thought of waffles and coffee made Kenny realize he was hungry.

As he swung his feet over the edge of the bed he

suddenly remembered that the sheriff would arrive at the ranch some time that morning. That thought settled inside him like a lump of lead, and he dressed slowly, then tramped downstairs. Even the anticipation of a good breakfast was of little interest to him now.

The men were already at the table when he arrived. Oats, Hank, and Elmo were giving all their attention to bacon and eggs and waffles; Tex, however, wasn't eating much. He sat scowling at his plate and paying no attention to anyone. Pat was seated across the table from Elmo. She looked like a conspirator, full of dark secrets, so Kenny sat down as far away from her as he possibly could.

Mr. Reed leaned back in his chair at the head of the table and looked at his men. "Ab Collier will be here this morning," he said. "I want you all to be at the ranch when he arrives."

"The law?" Elmo asked, as he paused with a bite of waffle halfway to his mouth.

"The sheriff," Bob Reed replied briefly as he stood up.

Kenny knew then that his father had not told the men about the sheriff's call. He sneaked a glance at Tex. The range boss shoved back his chair from the table, got to his feet, and left the room without a word.

Oats grunted. "Ain't nothing I can tell him," he mumbled as he helped himself to another waffle.

Hank looked up at Mr. Reed, but said nothing. He finished his breakfast and left the house. Elmo finished his waffle, and then helped himself to another. Oats quickly disposed of the one he had taken, left the table, and shuffled outside, muttering something to himself

but making no comments loud enough for anyone to hear.

Kenny glanced out the dining-room window. His father was walking toward the barn with Oats. Since there wasn't much use of his saying anything, he decided he'd might as well start in on his food.

Elmo looked at Pat; then he glanced at Kenny. It was evident he was excited, but he was keeping quiet. Pat smiled back at him, and Elmo grinned at her. Their actions irritated Kenny and he was relieved when Elmo left, Pat after him.

As soon as Kenny finished his breakfast he went down to the corral, fed Buck a measure of oats, then rubbed him down. Somewhat to his annoyance, he saw Pat and Elmo perched on the top pole of the corral discussing the sheriff's visit. Kenny could hear a few words now and then, enough to reveal that Pat was expounding the legal angles she had picked up from her reading of mystery books.

The sheriff arrived shortly after ten o'clock, pulling up to the front gate in his car where Bob Reed met him.

Ab Collier was tall and lean and bronzed, for he had spent ten years in the open as a range boss. For as many years now he had been sheriff of the county, and knew everyone by their first names. As part of his equipment he carried an old single-action Colt revolver in a greasy holster fastened to his belt. He always explained his preference for this type of gun by saying that the time it took to cock it gave him a brief moment to consider, so he had never shot a man needlessly. He and Mr. Reed walked to the barnyard side by side;

when they reached the corral, Bob Reed called to his son.

Kenny walked to the gate and let himself out of the corral. He would have moved farther away from the fence where Pat and Elmo were perched, but the sheriff did not seem to mind having these two overhear his conversation.

"How are you, Kenny?" the sheriff asked pleasantly, smiling at Kenny.

"Fine, sir," the boy replied courteously.

"Begin at the beginning and tell me what you know about this business," Ab said, his keen blue eyes making Kenny feel uncomfortable.

Kenny looked at his father, then back at the sheriff.

"Tell him everything you've told me," Bob Reed repeated.

Kenny began and as he talked, he realized his story would show up Tex to a disadvantage. Once or twice he caught Pat's eyes and saw that she was frowning at him. But nevertheless he completed his story by telling the sheriff about the rifle.

Ab Collier smiled when Kenny had finished. "Thanks, Kenny," he said. "You could have held out on me for a while. Are you sure there isn't anything else you ought to tell me?"

"No." Kenny's voice sounded strange. It didn't seem a bit like his own voice.

"Now I'll have a word with Tex," the sheriff continued. "If he has an alibi for the time after the fight, we can close this discussion and organize a search for Milner."

Bob Reed went to the bunkhouse and returned with Tex, who nodded to the sheriff, meeting his eyes with a defiant stare.

"Tex, I want to know where you went and what you did immediately after you had the fight with Matt Milner." The sheriff was firm, but his manner was friendly.

Tex's jaw was set in a hard line, but he answered evenly and calmly. "I rode up to the drift fence on the ridge. Rode the fence as far as Beaver Creek, then rode back."

"Did you take a rifle along?"

"I often pack a rifle," Tex answered shortly. "There's a renegade she-wolf on this range."

"So I've heard," the sheriff commented. "You saw the wolf and fired at her?"

"I got a couple of shots but missed her."

"Did you meet anyone while you were up there?"

"No," Tex said curtly.

"You had threatened Matt Milner, hadn't you?" The sheriff's eyes never left Tex's face as he spoke.

"Yes. I aimed to run him off our range," Tex said in an even voice.

Ab Collier turned to Bob Reed. "Did anyone else, besides Kenny, see the fight behind the barn?"

"No," the rancher answered, "I was away from the ranch at the time."

"Where were you?"

Bob Reed hesitated before he answered, "Pat and I were riding the upper drift fence."

"The same fence Tex was riding?" Ab asked.

"Yes."

"You didn't see him, or hear any rifle shots?"

"No, but we could easily have missed him. The wind was blowing so hard we might not have heard shots, had there been any." Bob Reed spoke slowly. "You understand, Ab, I'm back of Tex. I'm taking his word for anything that might have happened."

Ab Collier nodded, and turned to Tex. For a few seconds he looked thoughtfully at the range boss. Then he lifted a hand to the dark stubble on his chin.

"I'm not arresting you, Tex, but I am insisting you stay right here on the Lazy Y just in case I need you. That clear?"

"You'll get no promises out of me," Tex replied gruffly.

"All I'll need to make a case out of this now is a body shot up by a 303 rifle or a suspect who decides to leave this part of the country," Ab Collier added as he turned to face Mr. Reed. "Got a horse I can ride, Bob?"

"Sure. The boys will fix you up."

"Then I guess there's been enough talk for this time," the sheriff concluded in a mild voice. "I'll let you boys get back to work, and I'll do a bit of riding around."

"Do you want a man to show you the trails?" Bob Reed offered.

Ab smiled and turned to Kenny. "Might be a good idea. How about scouting for me, Kenny?"

Without waiting for Kenny to consent, Bob Reed ordered the men to saddle a horse for the sheriff.

Elmo jumped down from the corral and headed rapidly toward the barn. The sheriff and Mr. Reed

walked back toward the officer's car. Tex stood for a moment facing Kenny and Hank and Oats. Suddenly Oats turned his back on the range boss and walked away and Hank shoved his hands into his pockets and headed for the saddle house. Only Kenny was left to face Tex. He wanted to say something, but his mouth was dry and no words would come out.

"So you all have it figured that I dry-gulched Milner," Tex said harshly, as his eyes bored into Kenny's.

"I don't figure it that way," Kenny replied. "And Dad said he'd back you too."

"You sure acted like you were backing me," Tex growled, turning on his heel and striding toward the bunkhouse.

Kenny was roused from his surprise by Pat's hand on his arm. He turned and looked into her excited face.

"What did I tell you? They haven't a thing on him!" she said triumphantly.

"He hates all of us, especially me," Kenny moaned.

"Don't worry. He'll soon get over it." Pat tried to comfort Kenny, but her cheerfulness only angered him.

"Don't you think he had anything to do with Matt's disappearing?"

"I think he's innocent, and what's more, I'm going to tell him so." Pat stepped past her brother and hurried toward the bunkhouse.

Kenny couldn't keep feeling glad that Pat was going to tell Tex she believed in him. He realized he had not made his own assurance very convincing. Besides, the more he thought about it, the more he realized he wasn't altogether positive Tex was innocent. He knew Oats and Hank were more than just suspicious; their

actions had spoken louder than any words, and he still had a feeling that his father was a bit skeptical about Tex's innocence.

Kenny was still standing at the corral gate, moodily staring up at the ridge above the ranch when Elmo returned, trailing a saddle horse for the sheriff's use. Elmo seemed quite cheerful as he turned the horse into the corral and headed for the saddle house. Pat, at that moment, appeared at the bunkhouse door and moved quickly across the yard, her eyes flashing and her chin tilted up. She stopped in front of Kenny and placed her hands on her hips before she spoke.

"He told me to get out, that he didn't need any sympathy," she said in an annoyed tone.

Kenny stared at her glumly, but offered no comment.

"And he's packing his things," Pat added. "I ought to tell Ab what he's doing, shouldn't I?"

Kenny came to life at once. "You won't tell Ab anything," he replied gruffly.

Pat grinned at her brother. "You've told him plenty," she countered, then she turned and ran up the path toward the house.

Kenny watched her to see if she would stop at the sheriff's car, where Ab was getting into a pair of chaps he had brought with him. Pat slowed to a walk when she reached the car, marched past the sheriff, and went on toward the house, so Kenny turned and walked over to the post where Buck was hitched.

In a vague way Kenny expected Ab Collier to be able to find enough evidence, possibly, to locate Matt Milner in very short order. The sheriff would have ways of working that were different from those used

by his father and the men. Actually, however, Ab had had very little experience in handling a case such as this. During the past ten years there had been only one and that had not required much detective work. But Ab had handled expertly many cases of cattle stealing; in addition, he was a shrewd judge of character.

As Kenny took him over the ground the boys had already searched, the sheriff asked a few questions, but he did not seem to be looking for anything in particular. He spent a full hour at Matt's cabin making friends with Shag and poking about the ground outside and the household things inside. That night when they rode back to the ranch he unsaddled his own horse and racked the saddle himself. Before going to the house, he returned to the corral where Kenny was still working on Buck.

"Which horse was Tex riding the day Milner disappeared?" the sheriff asked.

Kenny glanced uneasily at the horses gathered at the feed rack. Tex's horse was not there.

"Tex was riding a roan, but he isn't here now," Kenny answered.

"Where is he—out riding?" Ab asked.

"I guess so," Kenny answered vaguely.

Ab smiled. "Well, Kenny, we've had a nice day even if we didn't discover anything. Now that I know the lay of the land, you won't need to waste your time on me. I'll just poke about by myself for another day or so."

"I'll be glad to help," Kenny offered.

"Wouldn't think of it," Ab said. "But if you turn

up anything while you are out, just let me know." He moved away from the gate toward the house.

Kenny stood for a while after the sheriff left, looking at the horses. Tex's roan was gone and so was the black Tex kept as a reserve horse, often using it as a pack animal. Since both horses were gone, Kenny had a hunch Tex had pulled out.

When he entered the kitchen, Pat cornered Kenny. The men were in the dining room and Mrs. Reed was serving them, so Pat had a good chance to talk to him.

"Tex pulled out," she said. "He asked for his pay and quit."

"You mean he came up here and told Dad he was leaving?" Kenny asked in surprise.

"He did, and now the sheriff will take up his trail," Pat went on.

Kenny shrugged his shoulders. "He couldn't have gone far, if he came in for his pay."

Not wishing to continue the conversation, he went to the dining room to see if the sheriff was still there. Ab was seated at the head of the table eating heartily. He didn't seem worried about Tex; in fact nobody seemed particularly excited. Kenny sat down beside Elmo, who grinned at him over a forkful of mashed potatoes poised part way to his mouth. Kenny returned the grin as he reached for the meat platter.

When the evening meal was finished, Ab Collier got into his car and drove away, saying he would be back the next morning to finish the job of checking and searching. Kenny had a hunch the sheriff was going after Tex, but no one talked about it, least of all Kenny.

In the morning the sheriff was back. When Elmo brought a horse for him, he asked him about Tex. Elmo was the type that could not curb his curiosity. Everyone else wanted to ask the question too, but Elmo was the only one courageous enough to put the question bluntly.

"Did you catch Tex?" he asked.

Ab Collier smiled at Elmo. "Tex?" the sheriff questioned, appearing to have forgotten all about the man. "Why, no, I didn't look for him."

Elmo's dark face turned a deep red and because he couldn't think of any reply, he hurried off toward the barn. Meanwhile, Kenny finished jerking the cinch tight under Buck's belly. Things didn't seem to look so black for Tex if the sheriff wasn't after him for running away, were the boy's thoughts as he worked.



Chapter 10

WILD HORSES

AB COLLIER spent two days riding in the hills above the Lazy Y. His earlier visit to Placer and the talk which Matt Milner's two men had started had not helped Tex's reputation. The men had visited the ranch and had borrowed horses to accompany the sheriff on his rounds. After a day's trip they went back to town. There they began to gossip about the affair, and it wasn't long before it became generally known.

The day Ab Collier went back to Placer, Kenny had heard him talking to his father down at the barn.

"I don't like the way this thing has worked out," Ab remarked. "Matt Milner made a lot of friends in Placer, and everyone is convinced that Tex shot him from ambush and then hid the body."

"Tex should never have quit his job, but he's a stubborn man," Bob Reed said.

"The way things stand now he'll never land another job around here, and he's apt to get into more trouble if he stays in town. He has a chip on his shoulder, and that isn't a good sign."

"How about the boys who were to work with Milner? Are they likely to make trouble for Tex?" Mr. Reed asked.

"They have done some talking, but I'm having my men keep an eye on them," the sheriff replied.

Kenny moved away from the barn toward the corral. It surprised him to hear that Tex was in town looking for a job. Then he grinned as he thought about Pat, for this new development would upset more of her plotting.

There was one part of the range where no one had searched as yet, so Kenny decided he'd ride over it and have a look; he saddled Buck and rode away without telling Pat he was going. The boys had not considered it likely that Matt Milner would have gotten into the high country above his cabin; for that reason Kenny decided to spend the day riding in Pine Valley and on the benches above it. This was really wild country, far above the limits of the Lazy Y range.

He followed the ridge trail, but did not break off above the cabin to ride down through the timber. Instead, he kept to the ridge until he was above the head of the valley before he started to swing downward. It was his plan to cross the upper end and make a wide circle of the valley.

He rode across the open grass meadows and entered

the timber on the far side of the valley. Then he followed a stream upward until he emerged on a bench that had a south slope and was carpeted with new grass. Kenny was so surprised to find the pasture so far advanced that he pulled up at the edge of a grove of spruce to look over the meadow. At that moment he spotted the band of wild horses at the far end of the bench. This meadow was a natural feeding ground for them, with its early grass and its high elevation. Then, too, they could gallop down a rocky slope into heavy timber and be safe if anything alarmed them.

The chestnut stallion that was the master of the band stood on a knoll above the mares. Most of the time he had his head down feeding, but every few minutes he jerked it up to listen and to test the wind. When he raised his head his beautiful mane rippled in the breeze. Kenny was so excited that his eyes shone. He knew that the chestnut was a fine horse, much bigger and more powerful than Buck.

For a long time Kenny watched the band. He could see among it fifteen mares, six of them with colts. He grinned as he recognized two from Lazy Y Ranch among them. Evidently the chestnut had raided the ranch herd and had driven off two of his father's mares.

All the animals seemed to be in good condition, and there was no doubt they were much better stock than the usual wild horses. Kenny had a hunch that a closer inspection would show the mares were mostly stock stolen from the ranches below, and the thought made him chuckle. As he watched the big stallion he became more and more excited. No wonder Tex wanted the

horse. Kenny wanted him, too, and he could also understand why Matt Milner had made plans to capture him.

As Kenny sat watching the band, he considered ways of trapping the big fellow. Running him would not work—of that he was sure. Slipping up on him and roping him would be dangerous business, although it could be done. The best way, he finally decided, was to make a corral trap. Elmo would help him, but he was not sure that his father would allow the men to stop their regular work to build the trap, for the log-cutting and post-setting would take time. Furthermore, his father had never let Tex take enough time off to catch the stallion.

As he watched the stallion, Kenny realized that it was natural for Matt to be drawn to the valley by this horse. He understood perfectly, too, why Matt would risk war with Tex and spend a whole season making the catch. To a lover of horses the situation was all very clear—here was a fine stallion, one of the finest Kenny had ever seen outside a show ring.

But why had he never seen the stallion before? That was odd, for he had seen wild horses in Pine Valley several times. The answer finally came to him as he watched the big fellow guard his band. The chestnut held a picked band on this high mesa and avoided the valley below. He undoubtedly had avenues of escape and possibly grazed on other parks where the band would be perfectly safe. Suddenly Kenny began to wonder how the big fellow managed an escape. It didn't take him a moment to decide to find out. Giving Buck a slap, he rode upward at a gallop toward the band of mares.

The moment Buck broke into the open the chestnut blasted a warning and charged down from the knoll upon the band of mares. He slashed at their rumps with his teeth and shouldered them savagely. Any mare that lagged behind was slashed at the flanks. In a panic they stampeded wildly toward a stand of balsam—and vanished. It all happened so quickly that Kenny pulled Buck up and sat staring after the horses in amazement.

To satisfy his curiosity he rode up to the stand of balsam. There he discovered the plan of escape—the band had plunged into an arroyo that deepened as it curved downward.

Kenny did not follow the horses into the arroyo because he did not want the chestnut to think he was interested in them. Later he would lay his plans to capture the band. Just now he had a long ride ahead of him. If he delayed any longer, he would not reach home until after dark, so he headed Buck back toward the valley and home.

This time he crossed the valley in a direct line toward Matt's cabin. When he reached there he saw that Shag was still on guard, but the dog ran out to meet Kenny when he whistled. Shag seemed to be in very good condition. He did not seem to be suffering any from hunger, even though Kenny and Pat had not been able to make regular visits to take him food, so Kenny guessed he had taken to making short foraging trips in search of food.

Kenny dismounted and patted the dog's head. Shag leaped up against him, then raced eagerly around in circles, but when Kenny tried to coax him to follow, he refused to leave the cabin. Since he couldn't

persuade the dog to go with him, Kenny mounted Buck and rode off, wondering at the strange way Shag acted.

He arrived at the ranch very late. When Pat questioned him, he said nothing about his discovery of the chestnut stallion and his band. Kenny didn't want anyone to learn about the horses until he was ready to act himself. There was no telling what Elmo would do if he heard about the stallion.

That night the moon was very late in appearing. The stars lighted Pine Valley with a ghostly, pale glow that revealed only shadows and indistinct masses that varied in size and shape. Shag sat on the cabin door-stone, his muzzle lifted. A great loneliness filled him, and a desire to run far and fast made him restless and uneasy. The memory of Matt Milner was still clear and sharp in his mind, but the strange noises he kept hearing upset him.

From a ridge above came a long, high call. It rose, wavering and mournful, until it reached a high note for a moment, then dropped to a lower pitch. The loneliness of the call stirred a response in Shag. The call was repeated, this time pitched lower, and filled with a hopeful eagerness. Shag lifted his muzzle and howled, his cry rising before dropping to a series of sharp barks. It was the first time the dog had ever uttered such a call, but it seemed a natural thing for him to do.

The ways of dog and wolf, though vastly different, are similar in many respects. The eager cry of the old she-wolf on the ridge was as clear and understandable

to Shag as it would have been to another wolf. Shag's neck scruff lifted, and he bounded out into the meadow, where he paused to lift his voice in another mournful howl. The she-wolf answered eagerly. Shag called again, then waited. The wolf answered, but did not move any closer. She knew that voice below came from a dog, and dogs were always associated in her mind with man, her deadliest enemy.

Shag whined and coaxed, lifting his voice many times. Each time the scarred old wolf answered, but refused to come to him. At last Shag broke and raced toward the timber. His slim, powerful body sailed over bushes, his fangs were bared, and his red tongue lolled out. Up and up the slope he raced, yelping eagerly as he ran.

Up on the ledge the she-wolf stirred uneasily. She had escaped the extermination wrought upon her kind because she was even wary and suspicious of what she ate and where she holed up during the day. Traps and poison and guns were all connected with man; those were things to be avoided. This dog bounding toward her was a man beast and must be regarded with suspicion. When Shag broke out of the timber, she faded back into the blackness of a thicket and watched him race across a little park. There was no man with the dog, she could see that, but she could not be sure that a man might not be following him.

Shag halted in the center of the park and again sent his call ringing out eagerly, at the same time turning his head from side to side to test the wind. The she-wolf's loneliness was great. This was the season of the

mating moon, when the urge to run was powerful. Her lips parted, and she sent forth a low whimper.

Instantly Shag leaped toward the thicket. The she-wolf let him get very close to her, so close that he got her scent and then he saw her dim shape, gray against the blackness of the bushes. Then without a second's hesitation, she whirled and fled up the ridge.

Shag immediately gave chase, whimpering coaxingly as he ran. His speed was greater than hers, and soon his muzzle was close to her flaring tail, then it was at her shoulder, then Shag was racing beside her. They sped up the ridge together, flashing from starlit patches to black pools of darkness, leaping over rocks and bushes in a mad joyous race.

On and on dog and wolf ran, without slackening their pace until they were high on the side of the mountain, racing along beneath snowbanks and barren rims that mounted up and up until they ended in ragged pinnacles. This was timber line, this was the roof of the world, and the air up here was snapping cold.

At one point they came to a lake nestled against sheer cliffs, and then they swept along a still frozen shore. From there the she-wolf headed down country and led Shag past the chestnut's band of mares. The stallion screamed an angry challenge as he charged to meet them, but they had no thought of a kill. Sweeping past him, they left him stamping and prancing and snorting his wrath.

In a small park they startled a doe and a spike buck. So suddenly had they burst upon the feeding pair that the doe stumbled and fell when she tried to bound

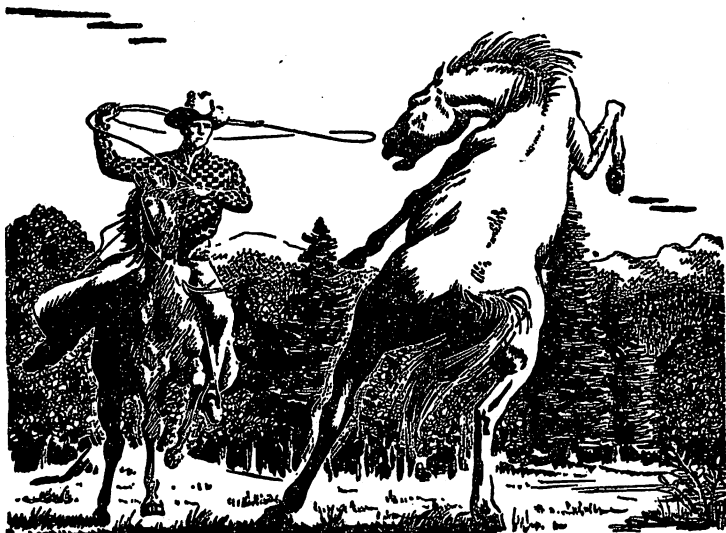
✓ clear of a thicket. But the she-wolf ignored this chance for an easy kill, for she swerved around the thicket and flashed into the timber beyond, Shag still racing at her side.

The two finally halted on a ledge overlooking Pine Valley, having made a complete circle of the valley. They sat side by side, panting and blowing, their tongues lolling out of their mouths. After she had caught her breath, the she-wolf lifted her muzzle and howled gleefully. There was a note of derision and defiance in her howl. Here at her side was a mate. As it had been with her kills, so it was with her existence in the future; she had outwitted man, and her kind would not die out. She would again run with her sons and daughters as she had in the past.

She growled softly and Shag answered; but when he moved closer to her she leaped away. The race was on again. When a thin slice of moon appeared in the sky they had headed back toward the valley. By daylight Shag was fagged out and ready to rest. It was then that the she-wolf headed for a dense stand of second-growth timber that had grown up amid a tangle of trees that had been flattened by a hurricane wind and lay in tangled heaps and windrows. Inside this jungle the old wolf could sleep safely through the day. No hunter could enter without warning her by the noise he made. She shared sanctuary with a timber-line buck and a cougar. They made an odd trio, these two hunters and one hunted, but they observed a truce while within the borders of their hide-out. The ancient buck lay down at dawn without fear of cougar or wolf.

At the edge of the jungle Shag halted. He whimpered, and he coaxed the slim gray one to return to the cabin with him, but she ignored him as she shoved into the dense growth; neither did she try to call him back when he trotted away down the slope. She was sure he would come when she called him at dusk that night.

When Shag reached the cabin, he stretched out on the doorstone and closed his eyes. He felt uneasy and guilty for neglecting his duty, but he was relaxed and pleasantly worn out. In a few minutes he was asleep.



Chapter II

ELMO TRIES HIS LUCK

KENNY SPENT most of the time in the hills, as he was still trying to solve the mystery of the disappearance of Matt Milner, and he was also scheming and plotting a way to capture the chestnut stallion.

Word had come to the ranch that Tex was staying at a rooming house in Placer. Kenny knew his father was worried because Tex had quit his job. The range boss had walked out because he thought Bob Reed and the others had not believed him innocent.

Kenny could ride where he pleased unless there was some special work for him to do at the ranch. His father had taken over Tex's work, so it was not necessary to hire a new man. Kenny did most of his riding

in the Pine Valley country because somehow he felt Matt might have gone on through the canyon and up into the broken country at the head of the valley. He would have been certain of this if it had not been for Shag. The fact that the dog remained at the cabin furnished an angle that had to be considered.

Every time he rode up to the valley he saw Shag. Kenny noticed that the dog wasn't so hungry as he had been at first, and he was convinced that Shag had started hunting. This was neither pleasant nor reassuring, because if Shag ever started to attack the calves there would be trouble.

Kenny knew that a young calf offered the easiest prey there was in the mountains. The white-faced cows could give a calf no protection, and the calves themselves were helpless. Bobcats and cougars and coyotes were careful in their attacking because they knew that calf-killing was a sure way to bring hunters after them with rifles and traps.

When Kenny stopped at the cabin the morning after Shag's all-night race with the wolf, he noticed that the dog was fagged out but not hungry. He sat down beside him on the doorstone of the cabin and began to pat him, but Shag was too sleepy after his long night of hunting to do more than thump his tail occasionally on the doorstone in return for the attention.

When Kenny left the cabin he rode down through the canyon. Although he had been through it a number of times, he was still not satisfied. In its sunless depths there was always an eerie twilight—a perfect setting for a weird tragedy. The trouble was that he could find

no clues to Matt's disappearance, no part of his pack or any other trace of him.

When Kenny came out of the canyon into open country, he pulled Buck to a halt and sat looking down over the valley that opened below. He intended to have another try at the wild stallion. If Buck had had more training as a rope horse, the job would be a little easier, but there was no telling what Buck would do if Kenny roped the chestnut. Kenny's horse was big and strong enough to throw and choke down the big fellow if he played his part just right.

So Kenny had been working Buck every day, teaching him the rules of roping—how to tighten the rope once it was looped over the neck of a steer or a horse; how to sit back, heaving all his weight on the rope and holding it there even after Kenny had dismounted and moved along the taut lariat.

The range bronchos and some of the big steers had suffered from this course of training, but it was the only way to make a rope horse out of Buck. Buck caught the idea fast, but he was still uncertain of all his responsibilities. Kenny took a couple of hard falls because Buck turned sidewise when a big steer hit the rope. But Buck also took the same falls and learned from them that he must be set when the broncho or the steer hit the end of the rope. He also learned not to allow any slack, because if there was slack, the roped animal had a chance really to get its weight behind a lunge.

Bob Reed did not object too much to having Buck trained on bronchos, but he certainly would not approve of roping steers in mid-season when there was

no need for it. He expected Kenny to train Buck at round-up or branding time, not otherwise. Running a fat steer knocked off pounds of gain and made the animal wild and hard to handle. Therefore, Kenny had to pit Buck against the range bronchos most of the time.

The range horses were wild, but they were all rope-wise and knew when to fight and when to surrender. The chestnut, on the other hand, probably had never had a rope on him. He would be a tough opponent, one that would fight hard as long as there was any breath left in him.

Kenny considered all these things as he rode slowly toward home. Of course, he could call on the boys for help and make a drive, but then Hank or Elmo might catch the stallion and each claim him for himself. Kenny wanted to make a try all by himself first, then if he could not handle the chestnut, he could ask his father's help.

Bob Reed made a special trip in to Placer to have a talk with Tex. He was worried about his former range boss because public opinion was against him and because Tex obstinately insisted upon staying in town where there were many people who had known him for years. Tex, however, had never had any close friends, as his life had been tied up closely with the Lazy Y, and he had never had any other interests.

Kenny went with his father because he needed a new pair of riding boots. He would have let him bring the boots home, but these were being made by the local saddler, Nick Hannah, and Nick was stiff-necked about

his boots. He never delivered a pair until he had personally fitted them to the customer's feet.

Kenny planned to keep himself busy so that he would not have to go with his father to see Tex. It wasn't that he had any feeling against him, but he felt that Tex was still angry with him and would never forgive him for not having more confidence in him.

When they reached Placer, Kenny hurried to Nick's shop. Nick finished the fitting job in a hurry. The boots fitted as snugly and as comfortably as the old pair Kenny had pulled off.

"They are the best boots I've made in a long time," Nick beamed as he wrapped up Kenny's old ones. "You come back soon and let me know how they feel after you wear them awhile."

"I'll come back," Kenny promised.

Fifteen minutes after he had first entered Nick's shop he found himself on the street again. He walked along looking at the store windows until he saw the ranch station wagon parked before a weather-beaten two-story building. Kenny threw his old boots in the back and climbed into the front seat to wait for his father.

When Bob Reed appeared, Tex was with him. Kenny was startled at Tex's appearance. When they stopped beside the station wagon he nodded to Kenny.

"I'd like to have you back on the job, Tex," Bob Reed said.

Tex's jaw set in a stubborn line. He shook his head. "I figure to head south into Texas after a bit," he said. "I don't think I'd get along on the ranch now."

"Suit yourself, Tex," Bob Reed answered. "That's up to you. Can we give you a lift up the street?"

"Only going to the corner," Tex said, turning on his heel and walking away.

Bob Reed got into the station wagon, and sat for a minute before turning on the ignition. On the way home they stopped at Martin's General Store for supplies, but Tex's name wasn't mentioned during the entire ride. When they pulled in at the house, Kenny said: "I'm going to hunt some more. Tex never killed Matt Milner."

Bob Reed smiled at his son. "That's what I've been trying to make Tex believe. I tried to convince him we didn't think he was guilty."

"Just the same, I'm not giving up," Kenny said grimly. He didn't stop to recall, however, that he had been more than half-convinced of Tex's guilt himself until he had seen him that day.

Kenny's resolve to renew the search for Matt Milner was real enough, and he did take a few succeeding trips into the country below the mouth of the canyon. But he didn't find anything, no trace of Matt's pack or any other clues. By this time the grass had sprung up thick and tall, changing the appearance of the foothills.

There was also plenty of ranch work to be done, but in their spare time he and Pat had been working with Shag. They were hopeful that the dog would eventually return home with them. He was always overjoyed to see them and was willing to take short runs with them, but he wouldn't leave the cabin. Kenny was sure that in time he would forget about Matt, but getting him to do so was slow work.

One day when they rode up to the cabin, he came

bounding out to meet them. Although they had missed going up to feed him for several days, he didn't seem to be hungry.

"We're getting some place with him at last," Kenny remarked as he swung down from the saddle.

"Let's take him for a run," Pat suggested.

"Better feed him first," Kenny said.

When Pat emptied the bag of meat scraps on the doorstone, Shag sniffed at them and wagged his tail. He picked out a bit of steak, then he set his teeth into a large beef bone and trotted with it to the edge of the woods, where he buried it in the soft earth. Then he came back and got another bone and buried it in the same way. Kenny watched him as he returned after the second trip. Shag wasn't hungry, that was sure, but he believed in having food stored if he needed it. Pat laughed heartily at the dog's actions, but Kenny refused to see the funny side of it.

"He's running in the woods, getting his own food," he said.

"What's wrong with that?" Pat asked.

"Sooner or later a wild dog always turns to calf-killing. It's easier than pulling down wild game."

"Shag isn't a wild dog," Pat replied indignantly.

"He will be if we don't soon get him down to the ranch," Kenny argued.

Pat jumped to her feet. "Let's take him for a run," she suggested. "If we get him away from here, we may be able to get him to go home with us."

As soon as they mounted their horses, Kenny whistled to Shag. The dog pricked up his ears and barked eagerly. When they started off, he bounded after them.

When they reached the fringe of timber between the cabin and the big meadow, he halted and looked back. Kenny whistled again and Shag broke into a swift lope. They let their horses have their heads and galloped out into the meadow, Shag racing ahead, yelping eagerly. Kenny led them in a sweeping circle that brought them back past the cabin. Shag did not break away from them, but stayed ahead of the horses. Then Kenny headed straight across the valley.

When they reached the river ford, Shag plunged in and swam ahead of the wading horses. He drifted downstream a few yards, but as soon as his feet touched the far bank he was off. Evidently he knew the valley.

When they pulled up on high ground at the far side of the valley, Shag darted into thickets and through stands of spruce, circling and returning to the riders several times.

"He acts as if he knew this country well," Kenny said.

"He was up here once with Matt," Pat replied.

At that moment Shag flushed a bobcat from a pile of rocks. The cat bounded across a little meadow, Shag leaping after it. When he was about to it, it turned over on its back and rolled in the grass. Shag plunged at it and met four lashing paws armed with long claws. With a howl the dog leaped back. The bobcat bounded to its feet and ducked into another pile of rocks. Shag gave chase, but with much less vim this time. Kenny and Pat both laughed as they watched him trot sheepishly back toward the horses.

"He's a beautiful dog," Pat said.

Kenny grinned. "And what's more he's learning about cats."

The boy led the way up into the country above the valley. He glanced up at the sun. The days were getting longer now, giving them more time to ride. At once the idea came to him—he and Pat could easily make it to the mesa where the chestnut stallion held his band. Being so near to the big fellow again tempted Kenny. Several times since discovering the stallion he had ridden over for a sight of the magnificent animal.

"Want to see something?" he asked.

"What?" Pat sensed excitement.

"I made a discovery," Kenny laughed.

"Something to do with Matt Milner?" Pat asked.

"Not exactly, but it does have something to do with the reason why Matt Milner came up here."

"O.K.," agreed Pat, and they galloped up the slope, Shag running ahead, and veering to the right, then to the left. After a while Kenny settled the pace to a steady lope. Several times they paused to let the horses blow, as Reddy wasn't able to stand so tough a pace as Buck, and Kenny didn't want to get too far in the lead. As they neared the high park, Kenny whistled to Shag. When the dog raced to him he ordered, "To heel, Shag."

The dog looked up at him inquiringly. He wagged his tail and his mouth sagged open, then he dropped in at Buck's heels.

"He knew what you meant," Pat said wonderingly.

"Matt had him well trained," Kenny replied. "That is one reason he sticks so close to that cabin." For a few minutes he looked ahead intently before he spoke again. "We'll have to go easy now. If we're spotted, you'll miss everything."

"What is it?" whispered Pat, who was burned up with curiosity.

"Just wait, and stay close beside me."

They moved into the heavy timber and rode along slowly. When they neared the edge of the woods, Kenny pulled up and raised a warning hand to Pat, but did not speak. He pointed into the meadow. Pat bent forward, her lips parted in wonder.

On a knoll only a few hundred yards away stood the chestnut stallion, his head erect, his mane and tail flaring in the wind. Pat caught her breath. Finally she managed to whisper, "He's a beauty, isn't he?"

"He's mine. That is, he's mine if Matt Milner doesn't show up and beat me to him," Kenny added in a low voice.

"No wonder Matt was willing to risk a fight with Tex," Pat said.

The stallion was standing near a dense growth of alder. He seemed nervous and suspicious, and kept turning his head from side to side. His eyes rolled and his nostrils flared. Below him the mares were feeding peacefully. It seemed unlikely that he had spotted Kenny and Pat, because they were downwind from him and in deep cover, but evidently he had detected something that had aroused him.

"He has something spotted, possibly a cougar stalking the colts," Kenny whispered.

"No cougar would dare attack any of his colts," Pat answered. "There'd be one less cougar if he did."

Kenny's eyes never left the big horse. At the time he picked Buck from a band of range horses, he had thought he would never want another horse, but as

he watched the stallion he knew he had to have this animal.

"How will you ever catch him?" Pat asked.

"He could be roped, then choked down," Kenny said.

Pat shuddered at the thought. "No, he'd fight like a demon," she said. "You'd get hurt."

Kenny nodded. "It will take a corral trap to catch him," he said.

At that moment the chestnut whirled and faced the clump of alders. His ears flattened and he screamed savagely, but he stood his stance. The mares jerked up their heads at the warning and were off in a thundering stampede toward the deep arroyo in a second.

A horse broke from the alders and headed straight at the stallion. It was Elmo's big pinto rope horse, and Elmo was standing up in his stirrups, swinging his rope in circles over his head and shouting wildly. Pat stifled a scream, while Kenny's hands tightened on the saddlehorn. Elmo certainly was pulling a crazy stunt, one that might cost him several broken bones.

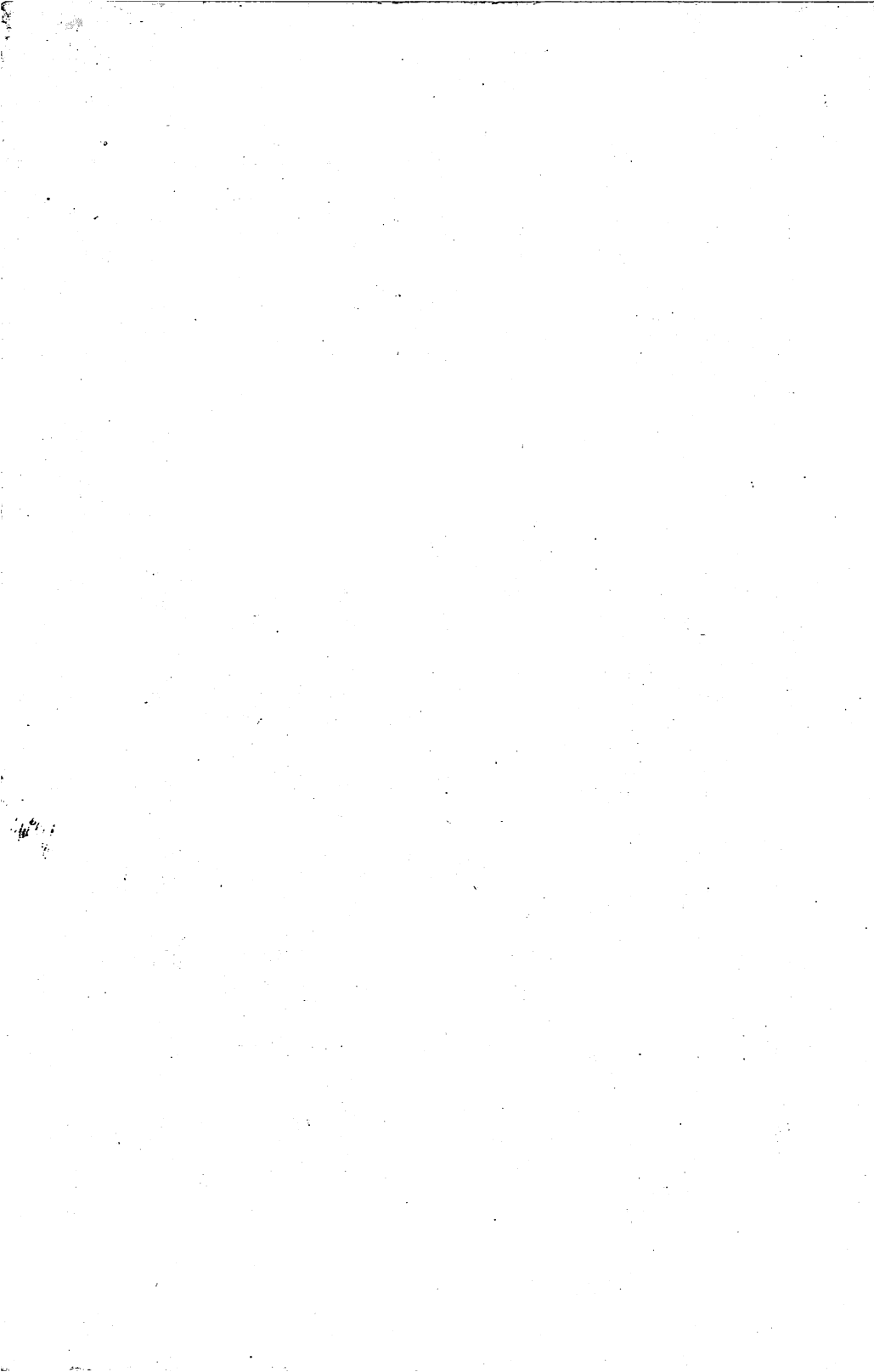
It was just like Elmo to do a crazy thing like that. His pinto had a great heart and plenty of courage, but he pulled aside as he charged down upon the savage stallion facing him. Elmo's rope sailed out and settled over the head of the stallion. The pinto set his feet and tried hard to heave his weight against the tightening rope. His form was good, and the move was well executed except for the fact that the wild stallion did not react like a steer or a range broncho. He did not whirl and pull against the choking noose; instead, he lunged straight at the pinto, his teeth bared and his powerful forefeet lashing out like pistons.

Kenny set his spurs and sent Buck lunging out of the woods. He knew his horse was too green at roping to allow him to try dropping his rope on the stallion for a cross pull, but he had to stop the lunging beast before he crushed the pinto and Elmo. Before Buck had taken two jumps, Kenny knew he was going to be too late to be of any help. The stallion struck the pinto and the horse went down in a whirl of lashing hoofs. Elmo dived clear of both, rolling over and over on the grass. Meanwhile, the chestnut reared up on his hind feet, his hoofs pounding the helpless pinto while his teeth slashed and ripped at his body.

As Kenny charged in and swung his rope, the stallion turned on Elmo, who was trying to scramble to his feet. Kenny fought to swing Buck aside, so he could lasso the stallion, but Buck was wild with excitement and out of control. Instead of obeying Kenny, he lunged head on at the chestnut.

The big stallion pivoted to meet this new attack. Kenny now became aware of Shag's leaping and slashing at the stallion's heels and realized that the dog had been trying to drive the big fellow away from the beginning. The chestnut was not only aware of Shag, but he was very much aware of Buck and Kenny. Now that he had shaken Elmo's rope loose, he wanted no further trouble. With a wild scream he leaped aside and let Buck charge past him, then he raced away after the mares. Buck whirled and gave chase after him. It amazed Kenny and at the same time provoked him to see the ease with which the chestnut ran away from Buck. He had picked Buck for his speed, and here was a horse that could easily outrun him. Since Kenny knew





he couldn't catch the stallion now, he pulled Buck in on the bank of the arroyo and watched the stallion vanish down the narrow watercourse.

Once more Buck was under control, and Kenny guided him to where Elmo was examining the battered pinto. Pat was standing beside him.

"You could have been killed," Pat stormed. "Of all the crazy stunts I ever saw." She paused for breath, her eyes flashing.

"I'll get him yet," Elmo growled.

"You'll lay off him," Kenny snapped.

"How come?" Elmo seemed surprised at Kenny's words. "He's a wild horse."

"No one can rope him without help," Kenny said. "The next time you try to get him there might not be help at hand."

"I'll crease him with a bullet and hog-tie him while he's down," Elmo promised grimly.

"And get a carcass for your trouble. There won't be any shooting."

"Shucks," Elmo said, "with a little luck I'd have had him."

Although Kenny was provoked, he had to laugh at Elmo's cockiness. "Just what would you have done with him after you had choked him down?" he asked.

Elmo grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "It was a fool stunt," he admitted, "but it was such a nice setup."

"By the way, how do you happen to be up here?" Kenny asked. "There's never anything belonging to Lazy Y this high up."

Elmo's grin widened. "I got to wondering why Tex

never let me poke around up here, and why Matt Milner wanted to round up a band of wild horses. Now I know."

"We'll take him," Kenny said. "And if I work out the plan to take him, I get him."

"I was afraid of that the minute I saw him. I guess that's one reason I took a shot at him." Elmo shoved his hands into his pockets, then he laughed. "Sure, I'll help you take him. Boy, it will be some scrap when we try to tie that animal down."

Kenny grinned at Elmo, who cared more for the excitement of a good fight than he did about any horse. But he did have a feeling for good horseflesh, especially for a wild brute like the chestnut stallion.

"It will take plenty of help to take that fellow," Kenny said. "I'll have to talk Dad into letting Hank and Oats work with me for a few days."

"You'll never get away with that," Elmo warned him. "Since Tex left we're shorthanded. You ought to know that."

"I can try," Kenny said.

"Oh, we can do it by ourselves; we don't need help," Elmo boasted.

"No, you don't," Pat interrupted. "I'll tell Dad if you don't promise to have help."

"We'll do it the safe way," Kenny promised. "We'll build a corral trap."

"For a smart hombre like that?" Elmo laughed. "You couldn't get him near it."

All the time Kenny was talking, he was rumpling Shag's fur. "We can try," he said, as he grinned down at the dog.

Pat reached down and pulled one of Shag's ears. "Did you see the way Shag tore into that big fellow?" she asked, then added with a frown, "but of course, you didn't see anything."

"I saw him," Elmo replied. "Believe me, I was glad he was in there tearing the hair out of that big boy's heels."

"I think you have Shag to thank for not being ground into mincemeat," Kenny said soberly. "Buck and I were a bit late, and I couldn't handle him after he got his neck bowed."

Pat walked over to Elmo's pinto and patted his neck. The horse was scarred and spattered with blood, but otherwise he did not seem to be seriously hurt.

"You'll have to doctor Pinto when you get home," she said. "And you'll also have to invent a tall tale to tell Dad. Just wait till he sets eyes on this horse."

Elmo grinned. "He hit a gopher hole while we were going downhill fast," he said. "You bet I will doctor him. He stood up to that stallion like a real trooper."

Shag seemed to want something, for he muzzled up against Kenny's chap leg and whined. Then he wagged his tail as he looked up at the boy.

"I guess he wants to get back to the cabin," Kenny said.

"Let's try to get him past the cabin," Pat suggested.

"I guess it's time for me to get going," Elmo said. "I'm supposed to be riding the calf range below the canyon."

"Well, you better go ahead and do it," Kenny said. "I've heard that old she-wolf howling every night for a week."

"Yeah, I know; I've heard her too," Elmo said. "She has a mate, so we'll be in for real calf trouble after a while."

"A mate?" Pat asked.

"Sure enough," Elmo answered. "I've heard them howling several times."

"The state hunter said she was the only wolf left in this whole section. He's been after her for two seasons, and he should know," Kenny said.

"There must be two of them now," Elmo answered. "I heard two wolves howling a couple of nights ago and again last night when I rode in late from the upper drift fence."

"That means every boy will have to start packing a rifle again," Kenny said.

"Be some excitement around here once more," Elmo laughed. "Things have been deader than a town picnic."

Pat smiled. She knew that Elmo thrived on dangerous escapades, such as the one he had just experienced, when he almost broke his neck.

"Excitement," Kenny exclaimed to Pat. "What does he want to happen?"

"I don't know, but we better get going too," Pat answered.

They waited until Elmo dusted off his hat, mounted Pinto, and rode away. Then they mounted their horses and headed down country at a lope, Shag running ahead of them and yelping eagerly.



Chapter 12

THE TRAP

SHAG RACED AHEAD of Buck and Reddy as if he were trying to lead them. To make herself heard above the pounding of shod hoofs Pat had to lean forward toward Kenny and shout.

"Does he know the way back to the cabin?"

"I don't know, but we'll follow him and see what happens," Kenny called back.

Shag ran down across the meadow for almost a half-mile, then swung toward the mountain, away from the cabin. Before they realized where they were, Kenny and Pat found themselves sliding down into the arroyo that the wild horses had followed. The water-cut bank was steep and the horses were forced to plow their way down, sliding and struggling for footing as they went.

Shag was waiting for them in the dry bed. When he saw they were going to follow him, he dashed away down the arroyo. Kenny and Pat followed at an easy gallop. As they rode along they noticed that the arroyo deepened and its rocky bed became wider, the cut banks rising like walls on each side. Even a veteran mountain man would have hesitated to take the trail Shag was following, because a sudden shower would most certainly cause a flash flood and turn the arroyo into a death trap. Afternoon and evening showers often occurred in the high hills, and either was apt to start a runoff flood. If that happened, the arroyo would certainly deepen for several miles before it opened into the valley below.

Shag suddenly put on a burst of speed and disappeared around a bend. They could hear him barking, but could not see him.

Kenny let Buck's reins out a little, for he wanted to find out why Shag was so eager, and he was also anxious to get out of the deep arroyo. Glancing up, he noticed there were trees crowded along the banks above. When Kenny and Pat swung around the bend ahead, they spotted several big trees growing in the dry bed. It was reassuring to find these, and it was also a relief to find that the course widened out as they continued. Willow and alder choked the bottom of the bed beyond the growth of the big trees. Kenny grinned. He knew now that this was not a flash-flood course, but was changing into a valley with timber crowding down on each side.

They broke through a willow thicket, and Kenny suddenly pulled Buck in sharply. Ahead of them rose

the log poles of a corral. Even at a quick glance he could see that the poles were well weathered, showing that they had been up for a season at least.

"I never knew we had a corral up here," Pat said as she pulled up beside him.

"We don't have." Kenny's voice was filled with excitement. "This is Matt Milner's corral."

"But why should he have one?" Pat asked.

Kenny pointed to a wing of the corral angling across the bed of the arroyo. A wide section of this was open, and the ground was freshly trampled, where apparently a band of wild horses had raced through the opening. Kenny laughed softly. It was all so clear and simple.

"A wild horse trap, and it's a honey," he said.

"Trap?" It was clear Pat did not believe him.

"Matt built it and then left it so that the horses would get used to it." Kenny could hardly keep his voice steady.

"How does it work?" Pat asked. "It looks like any other corral, except that it's higher."

"Very simple. When the corral gate is swung back, it closes the gap in the fence. See these willow bushes inside the corral? They hide the lower wall. The horses come tearing down the arroyo. They think they are going through the opening they have always used. A man hiding on the bank above then swings the gate shut." Kenny studied the corral closely as he talked, admiring the clever way it had been located and also camouflaged by natural growth of trees and bushes.

Shag kept running around Pat and Kenny and barking eagerly. He evidently had spent many days here with Matt, and so the familiar objects aroused him.

He ran toward Buck and leaped up against Kenny's leg. Kenny looked down at him.

"You helped Matt build this and now you want us to have it; is that it?" Kenny asked.

"I can't understand why the stallion would use this arroyo. I should think he'd be wary of a corral," Pat remarked.

"He probably was, for a long time. That's the reason Matt left it after he built it. Old hands at trapping use that method with wolves. They set traps and sometimes leave them for a year. The wolf loses his wariness and is finally caught." Kenny grinned. "Matt was a smart trapper."

"Do you think Tex found the corral?" Pat asked.

"I doubt it. If he had found it, he would have caught the band." Kenny leaned forward and studied the wing fence. He explained to Pat that he suspected the gate was built so that it would swing shut under its own weight when released.

"It might work," Pat agreed. "But it seems too easy."

"It's certain to work. Why, even you and I could trap the band ourselves," Kenny said.

"Tex must have had a hunch that Matt would be able to do that too," Pat said.

Kenny frowned. He was sure now that Matt would have caught every wild horse in the band. Perhaps Tex knew that and felt he had to act fast to beat Matt.

"In a way, I wish we hadn't found this," Pat complained.

"Why?"

"Because it just adds one more thing to Tex's record. We keep on finding out things that make it look worse

for him." Pat stared at the stout corral, a frown on her face.

"I don't know whether you're right," Kenny said slowly. "I guess if Tex had known about it, he would have used it before Matt ever had a chance."

"But the corral belongs to Matt. Wouldn't he have had a claim on the horses even if Tex had used it?"

Kenny looked at his sister. He knew what she meant. The first time he had seen the mesa he had known it was summer pasture. The band, therefore, would not go there until the grass was up.

"They probably started going up there when the grass began to get green," he said.

"That would be about the time Matt started in, wouldn't it?"

"I guess so," Kenny agreed.

As they talked, he saw Shag suddenly whirl and bound up the side of the arroyo. Kenny looked up and sighted a pair of coyotes peering down at them. He grinned as he watched Shag scramble upward and dash after the beasts. Then he dismounted and examined the corral gate carefully, but did not disturb it.

Pat was still in her saddle, so he turned to her, and said, "I want you to swing the gate back against those bushes above, prop a stick against it, and tie a rope to the stick. When the band charges, jerk the rope. The gate will then close. Think you could do that?"

Pat smiled eagerly. "You bet I can. I get the job. I'll hide up there in that clump of chokecherry bushes."

"Elmo and I can haze the band down the arroyo," Kenny continued. "After they are snugly corralled, we'll bring Dad up here."

"It's too bad Matt won't have a chance to use it," Pat said.

"I'm sure he'd want it tried out. And if he shows up he gets the chestnut stallion."

Pat gave him a wide grin. "And if he doesn't show up, you get the chestnut stallion?"

"If Dad will let me have him," Kenny said, as he caught Buck's reins and mounted him.

"When will we do it?" Pat asked.

"Let's wait for a while. We'll just keep quiet about finding the trap."

"Do you think Matt may still show up?"

"I guess that's the way I feel. I'd rather wait and see." Kenny headed Buck through the opening in the fence and Pat followed alongside.

Just then Shag came bounding down into the arroyo. He had not been able to catch up with the coyotes, who were expert at ducking and backtracking. Shag ran by sight rather than by scent, and this made it easy for the animals to escape him.

"We're sure going to be late getting home tonight. We'll have to cover the last half of the trail after dark and there won't be any moon," Kenny said.

"I don't care. This has been a wonderful day, except for some things that happened," Pat replied.

"I'm sure glad Hank and Oats won't be up this way," Kenny remarked. "We can handle Elmo as long as we don't tell him about the trap."

"You'll be starting on the calf round-up tomorrow," Pat reminded Kenny. "You won't be able to come up here again for a while, but I have to look after Shag, so I can keep an eye on the horses."

"Don't try to run them," Kenny warned her.

"I won't. After watching that big fellow attack Pinto, I won't let him catch a glimpse of me. He's a beauty, but I'm scared to death of him." Pat shook her head and frowned. "Honestly, I don't think he can be tamed, do you?"

"He can be gentled," Kenny said, "because he's a young horse." Shag kept running ahead of the horses until they forded the river. Kenny had planned to swing across the valley far above the cabin in an attempt to get the dog to follow them to the ranch, but Shag began to grow restless as the afternoon wore on. As soon as they had crossed the river he headed down the valley. Kenny whistled, but the dog didn't turn back, nor did he change his course when they failed to follow him.

"He must be going back to the cabin," Pat said.

"We've made a good start with him," Kenny replied.

"We'll win him over yet."

Darkness settled as the two riders climbed out on the ridge above the valley. Here they gave the horses their heads, for Kenny and Pat knew they would find the trail if left to their own instincts.

The woods and the rocky hillsides came alive with night sounds—the cry of an owl, the chorus of thousands of insects, and the snapping of twigs as night prowlers made off into the brush. A coyote laughed from a ridge above and was answered from the rim of the canyon below. Suddenly Kenny jerked himself upright in the saddle. A different cry now rang out from the ridge they were following. It lifted and held, then dropped. It was not the mocking laugh of the

coyote, but rather an eager, inviting cry, as of a wolf. Kenny waited tensely. The call was answered from the valley.

"Wolves," Pat whispered in a tight voice.

"Elmo was right," was all Kenny said. He didn't want to tell her what was really in his mind. The cry that came from below seemed to start from a spot at the lower end of the valley. There was something about that cry that impressed Kenny, but he didn't want to tell Pat what he was thinking. Instead, he would wait and do some scouting when he was alone, but he was almost sure the answering cry was the howl of a dog. Once before he had heard Shag howl, and he hadn't forgotten the wolflike nature of the cry.

The two calls seemed to get closer together as they continued. After a while Pat said, "They've met."

"Now that they've met, they'll run together," Kenny said. "I hope they stay in the high country." He was sure Pat could not know how much he hoped the she-wolf would hunt the upper country and not invade the calf range.

An hour later they sighted the lights of the ranch. Pat was tired and hungry, and excited. She liked secrets and now she had a big one to keep. When they reached the corral she stubbornly insisted upon rubbing down Reddy herself. Kenny had become used to her insistence on doing this, so he didn't argue with her.

Up in the valley Shag had met the old she-wolf; they ran together, but she had not made up her mind completely about him. She was not sure that he would make a proper mate for her. A wolf mate should be

willing to stand watch over the den when the young come, but Shag refused to share her hide-out. There was another thing that angered her, a strong taint of man smell hovered about him that night, and she snarled and snapped at him when he moved close to her.

Shag did not understand the she-wolf's mood. He growled eagerly as he edged close to her, but sprang back when she lashed at him. When she started to run, he loped at her side. She permitted him to go along because she had not yet decided what to do about him. Suddenly she headed down along the rim of the canyon, seeking a kill. From now on hunting would be a grim business with her. She would make night kills, gorge herself, and then return under cover of darkness to her hide-out.

Now she was in the foothill country, running smoothly, her nose testing the wind for prey. The smell of beef came to her, and she swerved to check the scent, but swung back again when she realized that it came from a husky two-year-old steer.

A quarter-mile farther on she picked up the scent of a calf, and raced eagerly down into a little gully. Bedded down in the gully were three white-faced calves, alone—their mothers were feeding in a meadow below. The she-wolf leaped down so noiselessly that she was upon them before they were aware of any danger. She ripped open the throat of one calf before it could struggle to its feet, then with the blood lust upon her, she tore down a second calf. She would have slashed the third, but Shag intervened. He hit the she-wolf with a mighty force and sent her rolling, for he had been trained to protect calves and to herd cows.

The wolf leaped to her feet and faced him, her fangs bared, her eyes flaming. Shag snarled savagely. Gone was all the affection he had for her, all the desire to run with her. She was a killer, a predator striking at his flock, and instinct made him revert to a herd dog. He leaped upon her and would have sunk his fangs into her throat if she had not jumped aside. As she did so, she slashed out at him, missing his shoulder by inches. Hers was the way of the wolf in a fight—she would not close in for a finish that would end in death for one of them; she meant to leap and duck and slash.

Shag whirled and lunged at her again and she gave ground. She was wary, and her fury did not dull her cunning. Shag was making a great deal of noise, something no wolf would have done, for noise might draw a man to the scene of the kill. It was not fear of the big dog that made her run; it was her cunning, the wariness that had allowed her to defy ranchers and government hunters.

Shag did not follow her very far. After she had disappeared into the night, he trotted up the slope and kept on running until he reached the cabin. The old loneliness came back to him again; this time there was something close to a feeling of guilt mixed with it. Stretching himself out on the doorstep, he lay listening for familiar sounds. His longing for Matt Milner was strong again; he wanted to be back with his master, to be able to depend upon him. Until late into the night the dog listened, but no boot heels clicked on the rocky trail.



Chapter 13

THE SHERIFF'S EXPERIMENT

SHORTLY AFTER Pat and Kenny's experience on the ridge, Sheriff Ab Collier returned to the ranch. He did very little talking with anyone when he came; he merely borrowed a saddle horse and rode off into the foothills. An unsolved case always bothered him, and as yet there was no solution to Matt Milner's disappearance. In all the years he had been the sheriff of Placer County, no mysterious death had remained unsolved. Ab was convinced that Matt Milner was dead, but he still wanted to know how the man died.

Kenny was too busy to give any time to Ab because he was riding to Pine Valley every other day as well as doing his usual routine work at the ranch. After he was reasonably sure that Shag was running with the

she-wolf, he increased his efforts to coax the dog to the ranch. What he dreaded most of all was the day when the men would come upon a calf kill with two sets of tracks around it. After that it would be only a matter of time until they would catch a glimpse of the pair together. They would immediately brand Shag an outlaw.

It would soon be time for the calf round-up. Until that was over there would be little time to bother with Shag, and no chance at all to have a try at the chestnut stallion. But there was one comforting thought—none of the men would have any time for scouting Pine Valley.

Pat met Ab Collier while out riding near the mouth of Crystal River Canyon where it opened into the home valley. Ab waved to her as she galloped up to him. When she pulled Reddy to a halt at his side, he smiled at her.

"You prowl around alone much?" he asked.

"I ride every day," Pat answered. "When the men are busy, I get lonesome."

"Never thought that riding alone was lonesome," Ab said thoughtfully.

"It is, though," Pat replied. "Mind if I tag along?"

"Of course not. I'm just poking around, enjoying myself."

They rode on up the slope, and Pat soon realized Ab knew the countryside intimately. He located the upper trail leading to Pine Valley, and headed that way, avoiding the canyon route. He did not seem to be in any hurry, neither did he seem to be looking for anything in particular, but he did stop a number

of times. Twice he dismounted to examine a patch of ground.

A short distance above Matt's cabin they moved into Pine Valley. The sheriff did not ride down into the meadow, but kept along the slope in the timber, emerging at a point above the cabin. They could see the cabin less than seventy-five yards below them. Pat sighted Shag in the yard near his usual place on the doorstone. He was looking up at them, his ears raised, his body rigid. Ab sat in his saddle watching the cabin and the dog.

"Is he mean about visitors?" he asked.

"If I whistle, he'll come up here," Pat replied. "He knows me."

"No need to bother him," Ab interrupted quickly. "Wonder how long he'll keep waiting, down there?"

"Kenny and I keep trying to coax him to the ranch to stay," Pat replied.

"He'll go wild if he stays up here much longer by himself." Ab swung a leg over his saddle and dismounted.

Pat watched the sheriff as he walked slowly to a stand of young pines a few yards away. He kept his eyes on the ground, as if he were looking for something. Pat was sure Ab considered this an excellent spot for an ambush, and the thought made a surge of anger flare up inside her. Tex certainly would not ambush any man.

Ab sauntered about for a while, then stopped behind a young spruce that bushed out to about the height of a man. He bent over and picked up something from the ground that he held in his hand for a minute or

two. It proved to be an empty cartridge case. Before putting it into his pocket he turned it over carefully. Even from a distance of several yards Pat could see by its shape that it was a 303 shell case. It was rimless; a 30-30, which was the same caliber, would have a rim. Ab walked over to his horse, and as he gathered up the rein he looked up at Pat.

Pat turned her head and looked into the open meadow below.

"This is a perfect spot to bag a deer," she said. "They come into the open meadow every morning and evening."

Ab nodded his head. "I noticed plenty of buck tracks," he remarked. "One of the boys will probably remember making a kill hereabouts."

Pat drew in her breath. If none of the men remembered shooting at a deer or a wolf from the point, the sheriff would feel he had found some real evidence at last.

"I may as well ride back to the ranch," Ab said.

"I'll ride in too," Pat said.

Ab kept his thoughts to himself on the way home. Pat kept thinking about the possible results of his finding the spent cartridge. She did get some comfort, though, out of the thought that there was more than one 303 saddle gun at the ranch.

Kenny was already back from the range when Ab and Pat arrived. He stepped out of the barn to take Ab's horse, as Ab swung down and dropped the reins.

"Evening, Kenny," the sheriff greeted him. "Wonder if I could take a look at the rifle Tex used the day he had trouble with Matt?"

"Yes, sir," Kenny replied quickly. The request surprised him because Ab had already examined the rifle carefully several times. He glanced at his sister standing beside Reddy. He thought she shook her head at him, but he couldn't be sure.

"No hurry," Ab said. "Go ahead and unsaddle the horse first."

Kenny unsaddled Ab's horse. He decided the animal did not need a rubdown, for there wasn't a streak of sweat on him. Meanwhile, Pat led Reddy into the corral; when she was close to Kenny she spoke softly.

"Ab found an empty cartridge up above Matt's cabin."

Kenny frowned. "Somebody must have shot at a wolf or a deer," he said, then he turned and before Pat could say another word, carried the saddle to the saddle house and took down the rifle from the rack.

When Kenny gave the sheriff the rifle, Ab glanced at the magazine to see if it was loaded. "Suppose we try a shot?" he suggested.

"Sure," Kenny said. "Anything special you want to shoot at?"

"Nothing in particular." Ab glanced up the slope and spotted a boulder several hundred yards up the hill. He held his sights on it. The rifle cracked, and the report was followed by the whining scream of the bullet as it ricocheted off the rock. Kenny grinned broadly, because the shot was such an excellent one. Ab pumped the empty cartridge out and handed the rifle back to Kenny.

"I couldn't do that," Kenny said. "This gun is sighted in at a hundred yards."

Ab smiled as he bent and picked up the spent shell. "I made a mite of an allowance for the range," he said, dropping the cartridge case into his pocket.

Kenny didn't ask any questions, and Ab offered no explanation. Then he turned toward his car, parked near the barn. "Thanks, Kenny," he said. "Guess I'll mosey into town."

"Why don't you stay for supper?" Kenny said.

Ab glanced at the sun, which was hanging low above the mountains to the west. "I better be getting back to Placer," he said.

After the sheriff had driven away, Pat hurried to the saddle house, where Kenny was wiping out the rifle.

"What could he prove by that test?" she asked anxiously.

"He just doesn't aim to overlook anything," Kenny replied. He put the rifle in its rack, then faced her. "I've shot at deer and coyotes many times from that slope myself with this rifle."

"From the spruce stand above Matt's cabin?" Pat asked.

"No," Kenny admitted, "not from there."

"I'm going to ask Hank and Oats and Elmo if they've done it," Pat declared.

"It might have been Tex himself," Kenny said. "He kept an eye on Pine Valley to make sure no wolf or cougar bothered the wild horses."

"I guess Ab won't ever give up until he finds out," Pat said.

"He'll have to find more than an empty cartridge," Kenny said, trying to make his voice sound convincing. He had a feeling that Ab was going to continue the

search until he found some concrete evidence. Once he got that, he could use the circumstantial facts he already had and could make a case.

At supper that night neither Kenny nor Pat mentioned the incident. No one else seemed to have heard the shot the sheriff had fired, so there were no questions, for which both Kenny and Pat were very glad.

That night at Matt's cabin, Shag was restless. He missed the companionship of the wolf and he wanted to run, but he also wanted a companion to race with him. Although he left the cabin early and stopped many times to listen for a familiar howl, he did not hear the she-wolf calling.

He loped down the mountain into the cattle range but he didn't find her. Finally he came upon a fresh kill she had made. She had killed two calves, but had eaten from only one of them; apparently she had gorged herself and gone to seek a hide-out. Shag walked around the kills several times, his scruff rising, a snarl rumbling in his throat. He was still not ready to adopt the ways of the killer, and so did not touch the freshly killed meat. All at once his desire to find the wolf left him, and he headed back up the slope. On the way he flushed a snowshoe rabbit. Matt had taught him to forage for rabbits and small game, so the rabbit kill was not an unnatural thing for him to do.

When he got back to the cabin he sat on his haunches and howled mournfully, his muzzle lifted to the stars. No answer came to his call except a distant echo from the cliffs across the canyon.



Chapter 14

ROUNDUP

ELMO AND KENNY rode together during most of the calf round-up. The job wasn't particularly exciting, as the cows were placid Herefords, bred for beef and not as foragers. Because they were constantly being handled, rounding them up was just a matter of locating them and driving them in with their calves to the meadow where the calves were branded.

Roping and branding the calves furnished plenty of excitement, but Kenny missed out on that because his horse was not trained well enough to work smoothly. Elmo and Oats were the ones who did all the roping of the calves.

The first day out Elmo and Kenny rode into the foothills below Crystal River Canyon. It was Elmo who

first discovered the wolf's kill in the little gully. He was off his horse and examining the tracks and signs of killing when Kenny reached the spot. Kenny slid from his saddle and stood looking at the carcasses. No one had to tell him this was a wolf's kill.

"This isn't quite according to the rule book," Elmo remarked as he straightened up.

"It's a wolf kill," Kenny said as he checked the ground anxiously. What he saw disturbed him.

"Sure it's a wolf kill, but there were two wolves in on it. Why didn't they finish the job? The hindquarters should be eaten off those calves."

Kenny stared at the tracks in the damp earth. He hardly heard what Elmo said, as he was thinking about Shag. If his suspicions were correct, and Shag had started to run with the she-wolf, then this meant that he too had been in on a kill.

"Something scared them off before they had a chance to gorge themselves," Elmo said. "We'll probably find another kill before the day is over."

"Probably," Kenny agreed tersely. He had a big problem on his mind and needed time to think about it. If he mentioned his suspicions to his father, Bob Reed would order the dog shot. His father was lenient about many things, but not with calf killers, because those calves were valuable animals.

After they left the kill, the two rode on, and soon had a band of cows and their calves gathered together. They pushed these up on a mesa where Hank had built a branding fire and where the irons were now heating. Then Oats drifted in from above with another band of cows and calves. Kenny held the herd in a

bunch while Elmo checked with Hank. He overheard Elmo talking excitedly to Hank.

"We found a wolf kill. Two calves ripped up, but not eaten. I better go back and get the rifles."

Hank sat on his heels beside the fire. He looked up at Elmo as if doubting what he had heard.

"You said wolves?" he asked.

"There were two of them," Elmo answered.

Hank pulled one of the irons from the fire, then shoved it back again and got quickly to his feet.

"No use going after rifles," he said gruffly. "You'll never see those killers by daylight, unless they're dogs."

"They're not dogs," Elmo stated. "I guess I know a wolf kill when I see one. Hamstrung, throat ripped open. Dogs would just worry them and chew at them. This was a clean, fast job."

"Tomorrow we'll take the rifles with us," Hank said. "Now that we're working the calves I don't believe the killers will try it again. They'll move out until we're through."

"I'd sure like to get a shot at them though," Elmo interrupted.

Hank grinned. "You like to sleep mornings too well to get a chance at them. They work mighty early."

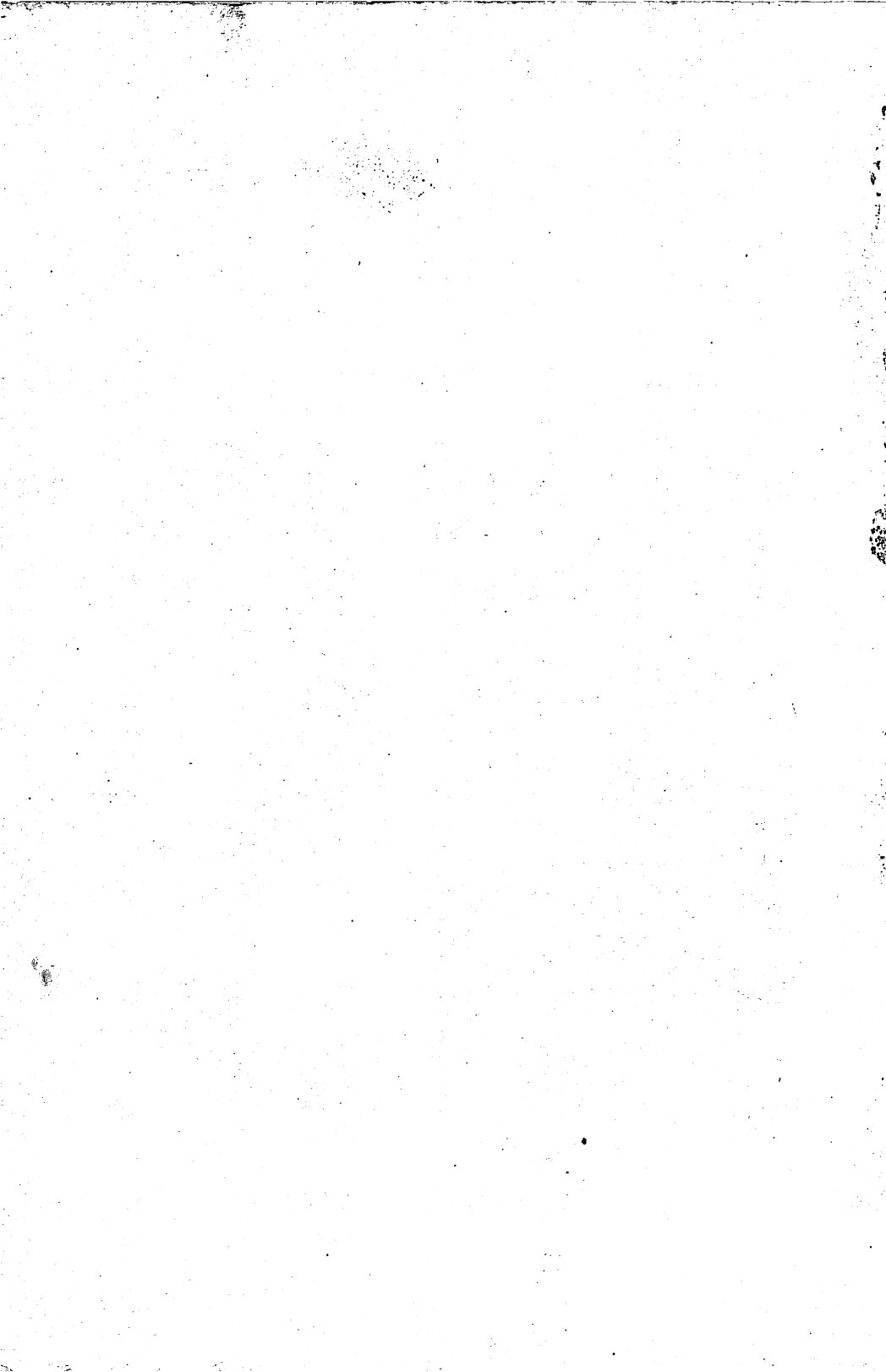
Elmo scowled. "You can bet I'll be out early from now on," he said.

Oats had joined the group. "Could be a dog and a wolf both," he ventured.

Elmo turned and looked at him, then across at Kenny. "This was no dog kill," he said stubbornly, shrugging his shoulders.

While Elmo and Oats roped the calves and held





them for Hank's branding iron, Kenny kept the herd together. A strong smell of burned hair filled the air, and the bellowing of the calves carried across the mesa. Kenny was glad Hank was taking the news of the kill so calmly, because now he would have a chance to do something. The first thing he wanted to do was to make sure Shag was running with the wolf. He knew that would not be easy to find out, but he meant to try anyway.

✓ Whenever there was a calf branding, Kenny drew the easiest job because his horse was not yet rope broken. Elmo and Oats had to wrestle the calves and then throw them after they were roped. They were all husky little brutes, and it was hard, tiring, hot work. Because it was hard labor, Hank called a halt early.

As soon as they stopped work, Kenny rode to the ranch to get his rifle. He would have liked to have had some supper, but he didn't want to waste any time if he was to reach Pine Valley before dark. He rode hard and was on his way down the timbered slope above the cabin just as the sun was setting. On a point overlooking the building he stopped and took up a stand. From there he could see Shag lying in front of the cabin. That was reassuring; he dismounted, eased his rifle to a position across his knees, and leaned back against a tree to wait.

The sky was aflame with a glow for a while. Then the sun sank lower and lower, and the fire died away. In a short time a star or two appeared. Blue shadows in the valley partly obscured the cabin and the dog. The chill of night in the high country crept up from the meadows below. Familiar sounds filled the night

air, but there was no wolf cry. Kenny waited for fully two hours after darkness finally settled down, then he mounted Buck and rode down to the cabin.

He whistled when he drew near it, and his signal was answered by an eager yelp. Shag came bounding through the night to meet him. Kenny swung down from his horse and patted the dog. He was relieved that Shag was at the cabin, but he knew he still didn't have definite proof that the dog was not a killer. He really had only enough evidence to warrant his protecting Shag for a few days, but that was all.

After he remounted Buck, he called the dog, but Shag wouldn't follow him, so Kenny rode away alone. He had reached the ridge above when he heard the she-wolf's call. It came from practically the same location as before. Kenny pulled in Buck and waited. Soon there was an answering call from below the ridge, but Kenny could hardly call it a howl. Shag suddenly began to bark loudly.

Kenny was puzzled and hardly knew what to think. He did have an idea, however, as to where the wolf holed up during the day, for she had started howling near the same spot both times he had heard her. There was a chance now that he might be able to locate her in the daytime.

When Kenny arrived home, Pat collared him the minute he entered the kitchen. She told him that Oats had done considerable talking that night at supper.

"I'm hungry," Kenny growled. "Can't you wait until I get something to eat?"

"I'll get you some supper, but first listen to me. Oats thinks Shag is running with that wolf. He went down

and looked at the calf kill, and he says one of the killers was a dog—a big one." Pat had planted herself squarely in front of Kenny so that he couldn't get away from her.

Kenny was tired and hungry when he came in, now he was also angry. "What does Oats know about tracks?" he snapped.

"Dad believes what Oats tells him," Pat said.

"So what?" Kenny answered shortly. He was so annoyed that he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"So that means the end of Shag."

"I guess it won't mean the end of Shag," Kenny replied. "Oats could be wrong."

"What will we do about it?" Pat continued, looking sharply at Kenny. "You don't think he was running with that wolf, do you?"

Kenny sank down on a chair beside the kitchen table. He looked up suddenly at Pat and certainly felt sorry for her. "He might have run with her, but he certainly didn't kill any calves," he said.

— "That won't be much help," Pat retorted. She went to the stove and turned on two of the electric units to heat Kenny's supper. "It amounts to the same thing."

"They need more evidence to go on than just a few tracks," Kenny said doggedly.

"Oats says he's heard them howling, and he's sure one of them is a dog. He says the dog howls came from the lower end of Pine Valley." Pat was so upset she slapped the lid down on a pot viciously.

"Was he up that way?" Kenny asked.

"Yes," Pat answered, "and he had no business up there either."

Kenny smiled in spite of his concern. Oats had a

right to ride any place he wanted to, and he certainly had business up on the ridge or he would not have been there, because Oats did not make unnecessary trips.

"I'm going to bring Shag in here and tie him up. And I'd like to see anybody touch him!" Pat turned and faced Kenny as she spoke.

"Have you told Dad what you're going to do?" Kenny asked.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said this was something I'd better not meddle in."

"I guess I'd better talk with him," Kenny said.

After supper Kenny went into the living room to talk with his father. Mr. Reed listened carefully to all that his son said, but as Kenny talked, he realized he wasn't making a very good case for Shag. He was admitting that he thought the dog had been running with the she-wolf. His sole defense was that he did not believe Shag had killed, or would ever kill, a calf.

After Kenny had stopped talking, Bob Reed looked into the smoldering fire.

"You and Pat have both tried to bring this dog to the ranch. He refuses to come, and it is only natural, since he is alone, that he would go wild and start hunting. He and that she-wolf will raise a pack, and soon we'll lose our calves. All we can do is to destroy both wolf and dog." Kenny's father spoke grimly.

"But Shag is not that kind of dog," Kenny protested. "He's intelligent and well trained. He even takes orders from me."

Bob Reed smiled. "He doesn't seem to obey you when you try to bring him home."

"I think we can get him; we just didn't want to force him to come," Kenny said desperately. He knew he wasn't convincing his father that Shag was innocent.

"I'm afraid he's as good as convicted," Bob Reed said. "But you don't have to have anything to do with it. I'll send Oats up there tomorrow morning."

Kenny got to his feet and looked his father squarely in the eye. "You don't have to send Oats. I'll go up there and I'll get him. Then I think you should take him to Placer and hand him over to one of Matt's friends. He's a valuable dog." Kenny was surprised at himself for the ease with which he could discuss this with his father.

Bob Reed leaned back in his chair and smiled at his son. "Perhaps you have found a way to save him," he said. "And it's a very reasonable way. But I'm going to tell the boys to carry their rifles, and I'm ordering them to shoot either the dog or the wolf if they get a chance. I can't afford to lose any more calves."

"I'll bring Shag in," Kenny promised. Then he went back to the kitchen, where Pat was washing dishes, to tell her what they had to do to save Shag.

"The only way I'll be able to get up there tomorrow will be to have you take my place riding herd for the boys," he said.

"I'd rather go with you, but I'll ride for the boys so that you can get away." Pat put a pot in the closet, then straightened herself. "And bring Shag back here even if you have to drag him."

"You bet I will," Kenny promised.

The next morning Pat and Kenny put their proposition before their father. He agreed to let Pat take Kenny's place riding herd. He would also be on the job himself, so that would make the work lighter for Pat.

Immediately Kenny saddled Buck and headed for Pine Valley. He had found a muzzle in a litter of odds and ends in the saddle house that he could use. It had been used on a much smaller dog than Shag, but Kenny thought it would do. He wanted to make sure that Shag didn't get away from him once they started home.

Before the sun had reached the cabin he was riding down into the valley. He whistled to Shag as he swung around the balsam stand at the edge of the clearing. When he reached the cabin he saw that Shag was not on guard at the door. His first thought was that the dog had been out during the night and had not yet returned. Kenny whistled, then called, but still got no response.

To look for Shag in such a vast wilderness seemed a hopeless task, but Kenny decided to make a circle of the valley. He rode toward the upper end and was about to swing north toward the far side when a thought suddenly occurred to him. He could ride up to the spot on the ridge where he thought the wolf might have a hide-out.

The slope was steep and the climbing slow, but Kenny reached the top at a point near where he thought he had heard the first wolf call. There he turned up the ridge and soon came to a bench covered with wind-fallen timber. As he pulled in he sat studying the tangled mass of fallen trees, second-growth spruce and brush. This was an ideal hide-out, one he was not

likely to penetrate without warning the wolf if she happened to be hiding inside the tangled mass.

He dismounted and ground-hitched Buck, then slid his carbine from its boot. He skirted the windfall looking for tracks, and was halfway around when he came across the wolf's tracks heading straight into the tangle. Kenny followed these into a dense thicket, then he lost them. He backed out and circled the bench again. The wolf could enter or leave from any direction, and there would be little chance of picking her off when she came out unless the place was surrounded by men with guns.

The best way to make sure this was a hide-out was to keep on pushing into the mass of logs and brush, so he moved into the nearest thicket and climbed up on a fallen log. By walking along the log he was able to see both ahead and around him. He made as little noise as possible, but he knew that even the slightest sound would warn any wild animal of his coming. When he reached the end of the log, he jumped off and forced his way through a stand of bushes to another log. After mounting it he walked along it deeper into the tangle; at the end he stopped to listen.

He was about to slide off the log when he heard brush snapping on his right. He turned quickly, and for just an instant caught a glimpse of a gray form sliding under a fallen tree that was propped up by heavy limbs. He jerked up his rifle and took a snap shot, aiming into a clump of gooseberry bushes a yard ahead of the spot where he had seen flash of fur. This time there was no mistaking the sounds. Brushes snapped and twigs popped as the she-wolf leaped ahead

in a mad rush to avoid the gun. Kenny tried to look out over the tangled jungle, but he couldn't spot her. He was sure he had missed her, but his shot had come close—that he knew.

He worked his way out into the clear and tramped around to the place where Buck was cropping grass, feeling that he hadn't accomplished much. It was possible the wolf would change her hiding place now that she had been discovered, and there was a slim chance that she even might move to another range.

Kenny mounted Buck and started back down toward the valley. On one point he was satisfied, Shag wasn't with the she-wolf. He could have run with her that particular night, but he had left her now. It didn't help much though, because if Shag had decided to run in the lower country, one of the men might see him and shoot him.

Kenny rode across the upper end of the valley and along the edge of the timber, swinging back to pass the cabin. He had more than half expected to find Shag on the doorstone, but the dog wasn't there.

Kenny sat on his horse for a time wondering what he should do before he finally decided to make a circle higher up through the timbered benches above the valley. If Shag were out hunting, he would be in heavy timber where there was plenty of small game.

He pushed Buck up into the woods and headed back along the base of the mountain wall. The going was very slow because there was no trail and the slope was steep. As he rode, he flushed two bands of elk and a number of does, but saw no sign of the dog.

At two o'clock that afternoon Kenny halted for a

drink at a clear spring. He was hungry, for he had brought no lunch, as he had expected to be back at the ranch by noon. As he looked down into the valley he could see the mesa where the wild stallion held his band, but he could not see the horses because of the distance. If they were there, he thought, he should be able to see them, but the more he looked the more worried he became. It was possible that the chestnut leader might have taken his mares off to some other park or range.

Even though it meant getting home very late, Kenny decided he had to take another look at the mesa. After all, it might be a good place to find Shag. The dog had seemed familiar with that part of the valley, so Kenny headed around the slope, pushing Buck as fast as it was safe to travel.

The sun had sunk to the distant horizon before Kenny reached the foot of the mesa. He knew he would have time for only a quick checking before darkness settled. Keeping to cover, he rode to the upper end of the mesa, where he checked from behind a screen of bushes. He saw that the mares were there, with the stallion keeping watch from high ground. They stood in a curve close to the edge of the timber and less than a hundred yards from him. If the wind had been right, they would undoubtedly have caught his scent.

Kenny was about to turn away when he noticed a movement at the edge of the woods, where the tall grass kept jerking and waving, back and forth. Peering closely into the growth, he spotted a black plume of a tail. That was all he needed to see to know that a cougar was stalking the band, hoping to attack one of

the colts. From the position of the tail, he knew the rest of the cougar was lying belly-flat in the grass.

As he eased the carbine out of its boot he leaned forward on Buck. In order to take advantage of the fading light he realized he should shoot the moment the cougar showed himself, but he had a great curiosity about big cats. They fascinated him because they were nearly perfect in their hunting technique. He knew from hearsay how they stalked their prey, but had never seen one in action before. Few men, even experienced hunters, ever see a cougar at work; in fact, most hunters never see a cougar at all except after their dogs have treed him.

The cougar was now crouching behind a small bush, having worked his way well out into the meadow. His intended victim was a colt that had strayed a short distance from its mother's side, but the colt was still too far away for the cougar to risk an attack; however, Kenny shot a quick glance at the big stallion and wondered what he would do if he sighted the killer. Then he saw the cougar—a scarred old veteran, lean-flanked, with high shoulders and powerful hind legs—rise above the grass. There was not a motion to his body, except for the tip of his tail, which jerked and twisted nervously.

The colt, unaware of the danger, shook its head, pranced across the grass, shied at a skunk cabbage, then whirled and danced straight toward the bush behind which the killer crouched. With a lowering of his head and a lashing of his tail back and forth, the cougar settled for a spring. Kenny felt his hand instinctively tighten on the stock of his rifle, but he seemed to be

spellbound, like a rabbit facing a big snake. He wasn't able even to swing the gun around for a shot.

Suddenly Kenny saw the big stallion whirl about, his ears back and his head thrust forward as he lunged down from the elevation where he stood. Just as the cougar broke cover, he came charging down. His scream of rage smothered the snarl of the killer. The startled colt whirled and fled to its mother's side. Its first bounding leap saved it from being smashed to the ground, for the cougar landed where the colt had been standing. But now the big cat was not thinking of a meal; he thought only of escaping from the stallion. He whirled, and lashed out as he leaped aside out of the stallion's way. His leap cleared a neat ten feet, and the stallion's hoofs missed him by yards. He bounded again, and by the time Kenny remembered his rifle the big cat had vanished into the timber.

The chestnut now pranced around his band, snorting and pawing, and whinnying shrilly. Kenny grinned as he turned Buck back into deeper cover. He'd have a tough time finding his way home, now that it was so dark, but the fight had been worth it.

In the excitement he had forgotten about Shag, but now he remembered, and pulled up above the cabin. He whistled to the dog, but got no answer. Evidently Shag had at last given up his vigil on the doorstone and had again disappeared.

Hungry and tired, Kenny dragged himself into the ranch at eleven o'clock that night. Everyone but Pat was in bed. He found her curled up in her father's big chair in front of the dying fire. When Kenny entered, she rubbed her eyes and blinked at him.

"Did you get him?" she asked eagerly.

"No," Kenny replied. "I didn't even see him."

"Wasn't he at the cabin?"

"I went back there three times," Kenny said wearily.

"I guess he's out on the range hunting." He sank down on the hearth and stripped off his gloves. "I'm as hungry as that old wolf herself," he said.

Pat jumped up hurriedly. "I'll fix you something. While you're eating you can tell me all about it."

"There isn't much to tell," Kenny said, but he was pleased that Pat had waited up for him. He needed to talk to someone about Shag's sudden disappearance.



Chapter 15

RENEGADE

KENNY'S MOTHER had let him sleep an extra hour the next morning, and he missed breakfast with the men. His father did not question him when he appeared at the corral. Surely the boy would be satisfied now that his father was right in ordering the men to shoot if they saw the dog loose on the range. Since Elmo had fed Buck his oats and the horse was ready when Kenny arrived at the corral, he saddled him and led him out of the yard.

Today, he knew, would see the last of the calves branded and ear-tagged. Then the cows could be led into the hills for the summer, where they would pasture. The round-up had been handled quickly this time because the cattle were being held in a small

area. Kenny scowled as he swung into his saddle. He was thinking that after the round-up was over the boys would start riding the hills and would really go after the she-wolf, and Shag, if he was still running with her.

Pat had agreed to ride up to Pine Valley that day to look for Shag. If the dog was at the cabin, she would bring him back; if she spied him in the hills, she would try to put the muzzle on him and use her saddle rope as a leash. He knew Pat would bring Shag back to the ranch if she found him. What worried Kenny now was that the dog might be running in the lower country. He knew the old she-wolf wouldn't show herself in the daytime, but the dog would not have that much sense.

As he rode along that morning he kept a sharp watch, checking stream crossings and ridges where a wolf might cross from one ridge to another. He saw no tracks, and began to feel that possibly the old wolf was too wise to run in the lower country.

At noon he rode down to a stream to water Buck, and was about to let the horse wade into the stream when he spotted tracks in the mud at the edge of the water. There was no mistaking the tracks, for they were big and they were deep. Glancing up the slope he saw Elmo riding toward him.

Without letting Buck drink, he headed the horse up the slope to meet Elmo. Kenny wasn't sure whether the tracks he had just seen were made by Shag or the wolf, but he did know they were fresh. The sun had barely dried up the edges of the depressions.

"Guess we got everything on this side," Elmo called as he pulled up to wait for Kenny.

"We better take a look in the next creek bottom," Kenny suggested. If possible, he wanted to steer Elmo away from the stream.

"Sure, as soon as Pinto gets a drink," Elmo agreed.

"You can water him on the other side," Kenny suggested quickly.

"It'll only take a minute," Elmo answered as he headed Pinto toward the stream.

Kenny swung Buck around and followed Elmo. He passed him and guided Buck into the stream, making sure the horse's hoofs plowed through the mud bank, obliterating the tracks he had just discovered.

Elmo looked a little puzzled when Buck lowered his head and drank thirstily. He himself dismounted and let Pinto drink, while he flattened himself on his belly and scooped up the water with his hands. After he had had enough he sat up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He kept looking thoughtfully down at the stream, but didn't say anything. Kenny, on the other hand, felt he ought to make some excuse for not watering Buck when he first crossed the stream.

"Guess Buck was thirsty," he said.

"He sure must have been," Elmo replied, as he continued to look down into the clear water. Suddenly he bent forward and pulled aside a tuft of grass. Kenny watched him out of the corner of his eye. Elmo grinned broadly as a green frog sailed out from under the tuft and landed in the water. Then he got to his feet and caught up Pinto's reins.

Both of them mounted their horses after that and rode together up the slope. When they reached the ridge Kenny turned right.

"I'll ride the upper end," he said.

Elmo headed Pinto down the slope without a word. Kenny was worried, because Elmo usually talked a lot, but he hadn't said much to Kenny since they left the stream.

Now that he was alone, Kenny headed in the direction of the tracks. He held a fast pace for a mile, keeping to the right-hand side of the ridge so he could look down upon the stream where he had spotted the tracks. If these had been made by Shag, Kenny should have little trouble seeing the dog. If they had been made by the wolf, she would be sure to keep to the willow thickets and be difficult to spot.

When he was far above Elmo, he cut down into the creek bottom. He slid the carbine out of its boot and balanced it across the saddle. If he flushed the wolf, he would have to be ready to shoot. He wasn't sure what Buck would do if he shot from the horse's back, but he had to take that chance. He pulled Buck in and sat looking back down the stream. Perhaps he had gotten above the wolf's trail and would see her as she came up the creek. He waited for at least a half-hour but saw nothing.

Turning up the stream, he rode for ten more minutes, then dismounted and started to search for tracks. Finding none, he was faced with the possibility that the trail led over the ridge into the valley where Elmo was riding. He was beginning to believe the tracks had been made by Shag. The she-wolf was too smart to be prowling along a fairly open stream in the daytime, and she certainly would not cross a ridge where

she would have to come out into the open. He found himself listening for the crack of Elmo's rifle.

As he rounded a bend he came upon three cows, their calves at their sides. This complicated matters, because he would have to drive the cows down to the meadow where the men were still branding, so he swung around them and started them down the creek. When he reached the branding fire, Pat was there with them. She waved and rode out to meet him.

"You sure made a fast trip," Kenny commented as she pulled up beside him.

"I didn't find him though," Pat replied. "So I came right back."

"You'd better ride the hills up on Willow Creek," Kenny advised her.

Pat shot a sharp glance at her brother. "Did you see him?"

"No, but I saw fresh tracks, and Elmo is up there." Kenny frowned. "Of course they could have been wolf tracks, but I don't think that old killer would come down this far during the day."

"Elmo won't shoot Shag," Pat said.

"Dad told him to shoot either of them, remember?" Kenny said.

"I talked to Elmo," Pat answered with a smile. "He'll try to catch Shag if he sees him."

Kenny grinned, but his grin faded quickly as he looked toward the branding fire where Oats and his father were working.

"Where's Hank?" he asked.

"He's the only one we have to worry about," Pat replied. "He's riding up country too."

"You hold the herd for Oats," Kenny said. "I'll ride back that way."

Pat didn't have time to answer, for a rangy cow with a calf at her side had broken from the herd. Pat shook out her rope and Reddy charged after the cow. Pat's hat flipped off and bobbed at the back of her head as she bore down on the cow in a cloud of dust. Reddy cut in with a swift movement, neatly turning the cow back toward the herd. Kenny grinned. Pat rode like an old hand, and she now had a horse that was capable of action.

Pat waved her rope at Kenny, and he waved back as he galloped away. Pat was happy working cattle. Her only complaint was that her father wouldn't let her rope and throw the calves too.

For the next two hours Kenny rode hard. He scoured the headwaters of Willow Creek thoroughly, but he saw no more tracks. Neither did he see anything of Elmo or Hank. That worried him because both men should have been riding the same range he was covering. He worked the draws and ravines, places where a cow would hide out, but he also hit all the high lookout points from which he could check the country below and above.

When he reached the upper drift fence he turned back. By this time the sun was swinging low over the mountains to the west. The calf round-up would be over by the time he reached the holding grounds, and the crew might be on its way home. But he did not hurry. When he did arrive at the holding ground, he found only dead ashes of the branding fire. The pickup truck was gone, and the cows had scattered. As he

headed down the dim trail leading to the ranch, he watched the slopes and the ravines and listened intently. If the she-wolf was on the prowl, she would soon be hunting. Tonight might well seal Shag's fate if he was with her and helped her make a kill.

When he pulled up at the home corral, the men were in the bunkhouse cleaning up for supper. Kenny could hear Elmo talking and occasionally he caught the voice of Oats. He quickly did what he had to for Buck and then headed up to the house. Pat met him on the back porch.

"Hank hasn't come in yet," she said anxiously.

"Why worry about him?" Kenny asked her impatiently.

"He acted funny when I met him on the way home. He snapped at me and said he was on the trail of something." Kenny could see that Pat was plainly worried.

"He didn't say what he was hunting, did he?" Kenny knew they were both thinking that Hank had spotted Shag and was after him.

"He didn't say." Pat gripped Kenny's arm. "Do you think he sighted Shag?"

Kenny shrugged his shoulders. Either Hank or Oats would shoot the dog as quickly as they would the wolf. Both men hated killers with the hatred of people who had to battle against them all their lives.

Kenny went into the house and washed before supper. Elmo and Oats came in and his father appeared from his office. Mr. Reed was in a very good humor. The calf crop was excellent and the spring pasture a full ten days advanced over ordinary years, but now he was faced with a wolf problem. Since the cows were

to be pushed up into the summer range, there would be no way of protecting the calves except to get rid of the wolf.

"Starting tomorrow we'll comb the upper range," he said. "We'll just have to make it so tough for that wolf that she'll leave if we can't shoot her."

"We'll get them both," Oats said.

Kenny's father ignored the reference to the dog. "Kenny and Elmo can work up toward Pine Valley, Hank and you and I will work the hill country below." He spoke directly to Oats, but Kenny had a feeling that his father was giving him one more chance to round up Shag.

Hank appeared just as Mrs. Reed came in to call them all to the dining room. He had stopped at the bunkhouse to wash. Kenny waited eagerly for him to speak. Hank looked grim and sour as he nodded to his boss.

"Did you locate anything we missed?" Bob Reed asked.

Hank shook his head. "Picked up a hot trail and followed it," he answered.

"A wolf trail?" Elmo asked as he glanced at Kenny. Pat was in the dining-room doorway, her eyes fixed on Hank.

"Couldn't tell, might have been a dog track." Hank glanced around the room. He seemed surprised because everyone was looking at him. "Followed it clean up the ridge, but the light played out on me."

"We'll be hunting tomorrow," his boss said. "You may be able to pick it up again."

"Be too cold. That critter will run twenty miles to-

night, anyway, so it wouldn't be worth fooling with." Hank moved toward the dining room.

As Kenny passed Pat, she smiled at him knowingly and Kenny grinned back at her. They still had a chance to save Shag.

"Tex always said we'd never get that she-wolf until she had pups," Pat said as they seated themselves at the table.

"If he's right, then we'll sure get her this time," Hank said gruffly.

"Why would she be easier to catch if she had pups?" Pat asked.

"She'll have to den up, and we'll be able to locate her hide-out; then we can line up and wait for her," Oats explained.

Pat's eyes began to sparkle. "What happens to the pups when you kill the mother?" she asked sharply.

Oats shrugged his shoulders, while Hank applied himself to his plate. Elmo grinned at Pat. "We'll catch them too and start a zoo."

"Smart aleck!" Pat commented.

"We'll have to finish them along with the old girl I guess," Bob Reed said grimly. "In the old days it didn't matter if we lost a few calves, but it's different now that we have high-grade stock and high beef prices."

Pat and Kenny's mother had seated herself at the end of the table. "I think we might find something more pleasant to talk about than killing wolves," she said primly.

That ended the wolf discussion during the supper hour.

"We've already been thinking about it," Pat answered.

"Did you ask your dad about it?" Elmo asked.

Pat smiled sweetly. "We thought we'd catch him first and then tell Dad."

Elmo raised his eyebrows. "Boy, you've sure changed your ideas a lot," he laughed.

Pat laughed, too, as she slapped at a weed with her quirt. Kenny couldn't help grinning either, because he knew that Elmo would be as curious as the proverbial cat from that time on.

"How're we going to catch him?" was Elmo's next question.

"You and Kenny can do the catching; I'll just stick around and watch," Pat answered and gave Elmo a quick smile.

Elmo responded quickly, "I'm ready to take a shot at him. How about this afternoon?"

"First off, we have to catch a wolf," Kenny reminded him, "and I have a few ideas myself along that line."

"We'll be chasing that old she-wolf all summer," Elmo complained. "One day more or less won't make any difference."

"We'll bag the wolf before we go after the stallion," Kenny replied briefly.

"You talk as if you knew right where to find her," Elmo said.

"Maybe I do at that," Kenny answered. "Anyway, it's worth a try."

"We have to find Shag too," Pat said. "I wouldn't have come along if I had thought you were only going to hunt the wolf."

"When we locate her we may find Shag with her," Elmo offered.

"No," Pat was positive in her reply. "Shag isn't any bum. He wouldn't make a pal of a wolf."

Elmo grinned, but Kenny frowned, because he believed Elmo was probably right. About all they could do for Shag now would be to get him out of the locality before Hank or Oats sighted him.

In front of them now was a wide meadow. Pat called out, "Let's race!" Without waiting for a fair start, she sent Reddy galloping out across the grass. Kenny held Buck back to give Elmo a good start before he himself gave chase. Reddy reached the far side of the meadow a nose ahead of Pinto; Buck brought up the rear, chafing because Kenny had held him in.

"You sure can ride a horse," Kenny heard Elmo tell Pat as he pulled up beside them.

This remark made Pat flush, and Kenny chuckled, for Elmo's admiration of his sister was very apparent.

Buck was still in a nasty mood, so it took Kenny some time to get him settled. It didn't help much when he continued to hold Buck in so that Pat and Elmo could ride well out in front.

"You bur-head," Kenny growled to his horse. Buck snorted, but he did settle down to an even trot as Pat and Elmo disappeared over a ridge.

Swinging over the ridge a few minutes later he spied Pat and Elmo seated on a ledge. Reddy and Pinto grazed near by. Kenny rode up to them.

"Slowpoke," Pat greeted him before he had a chance to speak. Kenny swung down from his saddle and seated himself beside Pat.

["Why all the hurry?" he asked.

"Oh, I just felt like going places." Pat waved her hand and let her eyes wander over the timbered canyon below.

"We are after that wolf," Elmo added grinning broadly. He bent forward and looked out over the vast scene below. "This sure is some country. Can you point out the spot where our wolf is waiting for us?"

"It sure is, but there's a part of it you still haven't seen," Kenny replied.

"Kenny," Pat warned him, "it's a secret."

"Secret?" Elmo was quick to pick up the word as he looked from one to the other.

"Sure," Kenny answered with a grin. "I'm the only one who knows where that wolf is at this moment." He was teasing them, but then he began to think that perhaps the old she-wolf might be holed up in the strip of windfall after all.

"Lead us to her. Come on, let's not waste any more time," Elmo said.

"After that we'll show you some more country you've never seen," Kenny said.

"When we get there, I bet it will be some place I've been before," Elmo returned.

The three of them mounted their horses and moved slowly on up the ridge above Pine Valley. Pat thought they should ride down to the cabin first, but Kenny was eager to try his idea concerning the she-wolf. The farther up the ridge they rode, the more he liked his own plan. There were many ifs in it, but there was also a chance it might work. If the she-wolf had left the windfall as she had abandoned it when he flushed

her; if she were there in the first place; if she could find no avenue of escape that was completely covered by brush and timber—all these thoughts ran through his mind. Kenny couldn't recall at the moment just how the patch of jungle did lie, but they could check it.

As they neared the down timber, Kenny warned Pat and Elmo to be as quiet as possible. "We must make as little noise as possible while we're looking the place over," he said. "We'd better act as if we're just riding past."

When they came to the first clump of the fallen timber, he moved ahead, but Elmo and Pat kept close behind him. The area proved to be much larger than Kenny had thought. There must have been more than ten acres of wind-blown trees and matted undergrowth, a large area for only three people to work. Kenny pulled Buck up and pointed toward the spot where he had flushed the wolf.

"She was holed up in that second growth," he whispered. "When I jumped her she headed up country, but I never got more than a glimpse of her."

"We'd better ride around and see if we can spot the trail she'll use if we jump her this time," Elmo suggested.

"I can go in to the hide-out and drive her out," Pat offered.

"You can't go in there," Elmo objected quickly. Kenny didn't think this was such a good idea either.

"Why not?" Pat argued. "She'll run out of there like a shot. There won't be any danger."

"No, that may be so," Kenny admitted, "but she might scare the life out of you."

Pat's eyes flashed. "Huh! I don't scare that easy."

"You are not to go crawling through the brush after a wolf," Elmo stated firmly.

"Oh! It wouldn't be so bad. All she has to do is to walk the fallen trees," Kenny said. "She can take that ancient revolver you brought along." He grinned.

"The point is, can you shoot it?" Elmo asked.

"Sure, I can shoot it," Pat boasted. "I have a target revolver of my own, only I forgot to bring it with me."

"Well," Elmo admitted reluctantly, "if you stay up on a tree trunk out of the brush it might be safe enough."

"If she goes in there, we'd better see if we can locate stands for ourselves," Kenny said.

Horses and riders moved on around the windfall. The country was fairly open on the upper side and on the ridge, but as they moved down below the area they saw how easily the wolf might have escaped without having been seen. Under the rim of the ridge a belt of berry bushes and brush extended along the slope to the next stand of heavy timber. This seemed to offer an ideal route of escape for an animal, for the wolf would not have to break cover at any place.

"This is it, I bet," Elmo said. "She could make a getaway here without our seeing her."

Kenny headed Buck along the belt of bushes and rode fifty yards before he found what he was looking for—a huge boulder rising up in the middle of a choke-cherry patch. He beckoned to Elmo and Pat, who rode up to him.

"I can climb on top of that rock," Kenny said. "She'd have to go on one side or the other. If she broke into

the open above, I'd have a chance for a good clean shot. If she broke out of the bushes on the lower side, you could get her, Elmo, from that stand of buckbrush."

Elmo looked the ground over carefully before speaking. "I think it might work," he said. "Only I ought to be farther back and closer to the line of bushes, so she couldn't double back into the down timber."

Kenny nodded. "Let's have a try at it. Pat can ride back and work her way into the jungle. If she should jump the old lady, Pat can start shooting to get her moving." He smiled at his sister. "Maybe you won't even get a glimpse of her, but you'll probably hear her when she takes off."

"I might bag her myself," Pat bragged.

Elmo grinned. "You always shut your eyes when you shoot a revolver," he said.

Pat made a face at him. "If I saw her, I wouldn't shoot at her. I'll just shoot into the air to scare her."

Elmo pulled what Kenny called his "ancient revolver" from his saddle pocket and handed it over to Pat. "It pulls mighty easy," he warned. "Be careful."

Pat shoved the gun into a saddle pocket. Kenny kept watching her to see if she was going to lose her nerve. She would have to enter the tangled mass of logs and brush alone, but if she was afraid, she didn't show it. To show her courage she rode away with a gay wave of her hand.

After Kenny and Elmo had hitched their horses in a stand of spruce, they hiked to their stations. The rock Kenny had picked was matted with rose briar and raspberry vines. He climbed on top of it, and got himself located, by lying flat on top of the rock, his head

toward the windfall. He put his rifle into position, ready for instant use. Elmo had vanished into a clump of undergrowth. When Kenny saw that Elmo was ready, he turned his attention to the belt of bushes. He felt confident the wolf could not slip past him without exposing herself.

The minutes ticked away and nothing happened. Kenny wondered what he would do if Shag would appear with the wolf. Of course he'd shoot the wolf, but he wondered how Shag would react. His arm became cramped and one foot started to go to sleep; but still he didn't move. Keeping completely motionless was part of his strategy.

• Very suddenly things started to happen. No shots had come from Pat, nor had she begun to shoot, but suddenly a rifle cracked. Kenny heard the smack of a bullet as it hit the soft ground. He peered into the bushes but saw nothing. The rifle cracked again, and he saw Elmo standing up in the bushes above. Elmo was frantically working the lever of his rifle. Then Kenny spotted the wolf. She was leaping toward him through the bushes. Kenny forgot to lie flat on the rock; he sat up and jerked his rifle to his shoulder. The instant Kenny moved, the wolf saw him and swerved to the right, breaking for a clump of bushes a few yards down the slope. Kenny steadied the rifle and brought the bead of the front sight down upon her shoulder. He fired, but the old lady didn't break her stride. Elmo kept blasting away from above, but unfortunately he was overshooting. Kenny pumped another cartridge into the rifle and steadied it just as the wolf plunged into the bushes. He fired, holding

low because he was shooting downhill. The wolf vanished from sight, and Kenny slid off the rock. Elmo raced down from above, and they met in the open above the bushes.

"Shucks, we missed her," Elmo announced.

"I guess we did," Kenny admitted. "She sure moved like a streak of lightning."

Elmo looked at Kenny, a sheepish grin spreading over his face. "You know, I think I got buck fever," he said. "When I saw that old she-wolf coming at me she looked as big as a tiger. I let her get clear past me before I could open up."

"I don't think I have the same trouble you have," Kenny said, "but I missed her too."

They decided to move down to the bushes, but they kept their rifles ready for action as they plunged into the dense growth.

"Hey!" Elmo shouted. "You did get her! She's over here."

Kenny swiftly shoved through the bushes to Elmo's side. There was the she-wolf on her side, her fangs bared in a last savage snarl. As Kenny stood looking at her, he couldn't help feeling sorry for her. She was the last of the gray ones. Now that she lay crumpled up at his feet she didn't look nearly so big nor so savage. Elmo, his eyes sparkling with excitement, knelt beside her.

"Shucks, she looked twice as big up there under the ridge," he said.

When Pat rode down the slope, the two boys were standing looking at the wolf. "I didn't see a sign of any wolf," she called to them.

"Come on down here and have a look at one now," Elmo called back.

Pat dismounted from Reddy and walked into the bushes, but she stopped short when she saw the dead wolf. She looked at the killer a minute, then turned away quickly. Elmo glanced at Kenny and a puzzled look crossed his face. He had expected Pat to be excited; instead, she had shuddered and turned away. Kenny thought he knew how his sister felt.

"We'll have to take her scalp if we want to collect the bounty," Elmo said.

"You take it," Kenny said. "I'll go and get Buck and Pinto."

"I guess I'm glad you killed her," Pat said to her brother, "only it makes me feel wicked."

Kenny grinned. "That old lady would have slaughtered a good many calves and fawns this summer if she had lived," he said, "so she's better out of the way."

"I know, but she had no other way of living."

"I guess that's true," Kenny agreed. "One thing I am glad of, and that is that Shag wasn't with her."

Elmo came up from the bushes, the wolf scalp rolled up and tied with a piece of string.

Kenny had Buck and Pinto waiting, so Elmo tucked the scalp into his saddlebag. As he did so he gave Pat a careful glance. The smile she gave him in return made him beam.

"Boy, will we lay it onto Hank and Oats when we get back to the ranch!" he said, turning to Kenny.

"Now it's time for the second surprise," Kenny said.

"Lead me to it," Elmo answered eagerly.

Kenny led them across the upper end of Pine Valley

to the spot where the deep arroyo opened into the meadows. He was eager to see what Elmo would do when he saw Matt's horse trap. By the time they had gone a half-mile, Elmo was convinced they were on their way up to the high mesa for a try at the wild stallion.

The corral was so well hidden by natural growth of brush and trees that Pinto's nose was almost touching the lower side of it before Elmo saw it. When he did see it he pulled Pinto in abruptly and just stared. Until he had shifted Pinto so that he could study it carefully, he never spoke. Suddenly, however, he let out a whoop and spurred his horse through the opening in the wing. Whirling Pinto about, he waited for Pat and Kenny to join him.

"Surprised?" Pat asked gleefully.

"Think it will work?" Kenny kept watching Elmo's mouth to see if it was going to close, for it was still wide open in surprise.

Elmo recovered his powers of speech at last. "It can't miss," he said, then he shook his head. "No wonder Tex knocked Matt off." Suddenly he caught himself as he saw the look on Pat's face, and then Kenny's frown. "I mean, this could have had something to do with Milner's disappearing," he added lamely.

"I don't think Tex knows the trap's here," Kenny said.

"He couldn't possibly know," Pat added sharply.

Elmo squirmed in his saddle. He looked from Pat to Kenny. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"You mean you want to try catching them?" Pat asked, a twinkle in her eyes.

"Sure," answered Elmo impatiently. "We'll catch the whole bunch. Boy, what a day! We got the wolf, and now we'll get ourselves a whole herd of horses." Elmo's excitement was great as he slid out of the saddle and practically ran to the gate.

"What do we do after we corral them?" Kenny asked.

"We dab a rope on the big boy and have some fun." Elmo turned back from the gate. "This is slick. We just swing the gate around and let Pat hide up in the bushes with a trip rope."

"We're not going to do anything of the kind," Kenny said firmly. "We just came up here to let you see it."

"You mean we have to get your dad here and the boys, too, before anything can happen?" Elmo asked.

"Certainly; it will take all of us to handle the stallion," Kenny said.

"Yeah, I know what is going to happen then," Elmo growled. "Your dad will boss the show. Oats and Hank will work him. All we'll be allowed to do will be to sit on the top pole and watch." He turned away from the gate in disgust.

"Elmo is right about Dad and the boys," Pat said. "The three of us could trap them. Anyway, I'd like to see the look on the faces of the others when we bring them here and show them what we've caught."

Kenny smiled and Elmo looked at him eagerly. "Sure," Elmo said. "That's an idea. We'll trap them, then you go tell your dad."

"We'd have to be sure to make it work the first time," Kenny warned. "If we miss, we'll never get that big fellow to come down here a second time."

"Can't miss," Elmo stated flatly.

"We could easily fumble it," Kenny said grimly. "If that stallion sees the trap in time, he'll turn his band, and I'd like to see anyone stop him if he heads back up the arroyo."

"What do you think we'll be doing all that time? Why, we'll be right on their tails shagging them along."

"O.K., we'll have a try at it," Kenny agreed. "Our luck has been good so far today. But we'll not be in too big a hurry and will do it right."

"Sure, sure," Elmo agreed.

Kenny swung down from his saddle. As he unfastened Pat's rope from her saddle he cautioned her, "You mustn't get excited and stand up or show yourself. If you do, they'll double back."

"I promise I won't get excited," Pat was positive about that.

Kenny looked at Elmo and grinned. "Just the same, I've seen some people get pretty excited," he said.

Elmo, who had walked over to the gate, turned and looked at Pat. "You could get so excited that you wouldn't be able to pull the rope," he said seriously. "Like me, when I saw that old she-wolf coming at me through the bushes."

Pat laughed. "Did you get buck fever, Elmo?"

"I sure did," Elmo admitted. "I shot the air full of holes."

"I won't get buck fever," Pat said calmly. "I'll be as cool as a cucumber."

"You can shut your eyes when you pull the rope," Elmo suggested.

"I won't shut my eyes," Pat declared. "I don't intend to miss anything if I can help it."

As they set about getting the trap ready, they found that Matt Milner had planned the set very carefully. When the corral gate was closed, an opening was left above the corral. It was through this opening that the herd had been passing. When the gate was opened, it swung back and closed the gap in the fence wing that had been built to guide the horses into the corral. Since the gate was at a corner of the corral, the new opening made it appear to be the opening in the fence. Once the herd galloped into the corral, the gate could be released; it would then swing shut of its own weight.

Kenny and Elmo swung the gate back and propped it with a stout pole. They fastened Pat's saddle rope to the prop so that she could jerk it loose to allow the gate to swing shut. Kenny then ran the rope along the ground to a clump of bushes where Pat could hide. When everything was ready, Pat took her place in the bushes. Kenny waved a signal to her, and she jerked the rope, letting the heavy gate swing shut. The instant it closed a heavy bar dropped into place, holding it firmly shut.

"Milner was a smart guy," Elmo remarked admiringly as he examined the heavy bar that Matt had fashioned. "He fixed himself a lock that really works."

Kenny nodded. He was thinking how sad it was that Matt had never been able to use the trap that he had spent a summer making. "I guess we can reset it now and get going," he said.

Pat came back from the thicket, her face flushed with excitement.

"It worked!" she cried.

"Slick as an eel," Elmo agreed.

"The stallion will naturally stay behind his band," Kenny said. "Be sure he's inside before you pull the rope."

"That gate would pop him right in if he stopped," Elmo said with a grin.

"On the other hand, if the stallion should be in the lead, pull the rope the minute he's inside. We want him more than we want the mares and colts." Kenny spoke thoughtfully.

"But we want to get them all," Pat protested.

"Kenny's right," Elmo said. "If the big boy goes in first and finds he's trapped, he'll rush out before the others have a chance to get inside. Jerk the rope the minute he's through the gate."

"I see," Pat answered.

"I think he'll stay back to whip up the stragglers; but then again, he might take the lead," Kenny said. "It's hard to tell what he'll do, but we'll try to stay on their heels and keep them bunched."

Pat seated herself in the thicket while the boys reset the trap. Kenny led Reddy down the arroyo and tied her to a tree, well out of sight of the corral. When he came back, Elmo was mounted on Pinto and waiting. Pat stood up to watch them leave. She looked anxiously at the rifle on Kenny's saddle.

"You won't need to use your rifle, will you?"

"I don't think so, but I'm taking it along anyhow," Kenny replied. He was thinking of the close shave Elmo had had with the big horse that day in the meadow.

Elmo grinned. "We can fire a few shots to keep them moving. But don't worry; we won't try roping him."

With that Kenny and Elmo rode away.



Chapter 17

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

KENNY DECIDED the best approach was to ride down the arroyo and climb out as soon as they could find a side ravine, so as they rode they scanned the banks for a ravine that would lead to the mesa. Finally they came to a brush-choked ravine which they followed up to the bench above. The boys had to dismount and lead their horses the last few yards because the bank was too steep for Buck and Pinto to manage with riders in the saddles.

Keeping to cover in a stand of timber, they headed toward the mesa where they thought the horses should be grazing. They made a wide circle after checking the wind and approached the mesa from above. They didn't move to the edge of the timber until they were

near the widest of the meadows. A brisk wind was blowing into their faces, but they knew the stallion had sharp ears; they also knew he would detect any movement should they get too close to the edge of the woods.

When Kenny thought they were in the right position, the two of them moved carefully toward the edge of the open meadow. Pulling up in a stand of aspen trees, they looked out over the area. They were both tense and eager, for if the chestnut stallion had taken his band to some other feeding ground, the plan would have to be abandoned.

Kenny breathed more easily as he spied the big fellow standing at the far side of the meadow near the woods. Elmo saw him at the same instant. As usual, the stallion was on high ground. He didn't seem to be nervous or suspicious, for his head was down and he was contentedly cropping grass. The mares were feeding some distance below him. Suddenly he became alert, his ears stood forward, his nostrils flared as he listened and tested the wind. For a full minute he stood with head erect before dropping it to continue nibbling grass.

"Isn't he a beaut?" Kenny whispered.

"He's a mean customer," Elmo answered with half-closed eyes as he squinted at the big horse.

"Stay here while I circle around and get on the other side of him," Kenny said. "When I break cover, close in. That will head the band straight down toward the arroyo." Kenny kept his eyes on the big horse, checking his build with a critical eye. The stallion was heavy in the chest and thick-bodied, but he had a fine head. Kenny was sure he'd be the fastest horse the Lazy Y

had ever owned, because he had long, powerful legs, that is, if he could catch him!

Elmo was staring at the horse, picturing himself astride the big animal and sending him galloping down a race track. Then an eager grin spread over his face.

"Get what I said?" Kenny asked.

"Sure did," Elmo answered. "Boy, I'll bet he'd make a bucking horse to end all shows."

"He's not going to be an outlaw," Kenny was firm in this statement. "I'll gentle him—you wait and see."

"Don't think that'll be easy to do," Elmo replied. "I think he's a killer."

Kenny shook his head stubbornly. "I agree with you. He has a good head. He hasn't the look of an outlaw in his eyes."

Elmo closed one eye as he sized up the stallion. "I sure want to be around the first time you ride him," he laughed.

Kenny pulled Buck's reins and headed back into the timber. Now that the moment for the drive was near he felt his pulses pounding. He circled and rode through the timber toward the spot where the stallion was feeding. He eased Buck along carefully because the wind was now quartering and the chestnut might hear the noise from any broken branch or loose stone. The moment they reached the edge of the woods, Kenny pulled Buck up to check. The stallion had his back to him and was still feeding.

Kenny leaned forward and spoke softly to Buck, "This is it, Buck."

The horse shook his head and fought his bit. He seemed to sense the excitement in Kenny, who whipped

off his hat and touched Buck with his spurs. The instant the steel pricked Buck's flanks he was off, charging out of the timber in a wild rush. Kenny yelled at the top of his lungs and kept fanning Buck with his hat. The burst of speed Buck put on carried him clear of the woods and halfway to the stallion before the big fellow had a chance to whirl and face the attack. At that moment Kenny caught a glimpse of Elmo swinging his rope and yelling like a Comanche.

For a moment Kenny thought the stallion was going to stand his ground, so he tried to slow up Buck. The chestnut was screaming a warning to the mares, his ears laid back, his mouth open, and his nostrils flaring. Kenny glanced hurriedly across the mesa to see if he could depend on Elmo should the stallion charge him, but Elmo seemed to be having trouble with Pinto, the big gelding wanted nothing to do with the stallion. Apparently he remembered the terrible lashing he had taken the last time they met. Elmo dug his spurs into Pinto and struck him with his quirt, having lost his rope. He also seemed to be having trouble staying in the saddle. Pinto at that moment was putting on a bucking show worthy of any outlaw.

Kenny tried to stop Buck, but he couldn't even slow him down. For a time it seemed almost certain that the two horses would collide, but the stallion had his mares to protect. So he leaped aside to let Buck charge past him. Then he whirled and galloped after the fleeing herd. Kenny gasped in relief as Buck pivoted and thundered after the stallion.

The stallion was running away from Kenny with every stride, so he leaned forward in his saddle and

urged his horse to greater speed. Buck did his best, but the chestnut had succeeded in getting his herd over the rim of the arroyo and out of sight before Buck could even reach the edge of the meadow.

When they came to the place where the band had gone over the bank, Kenny pulled Buck up. It didn't seem possible for anything less sure-footed than a mountain sheep to be able to go down the side of the arroyo, but the stallion sent his herd straight down, and he was slashing at the rumps of those who held back. The mares plunged and plowed over rocks and through bushes, and one of them even stumbled and rolled to the bottom. A colt screamed as a mare knocked it off its feet and then plunged over it. Dust lifted like a smoke screen, enveloping the plunging animals.

Kenny eased Buck forward over the edge and let him feel his way downward. He had no time even to look back at Elmo, for the stallion might gain so great a lead that he would start to scout the arroyo as he pushed the mares along.

When Buck managed to slide down the last steep pitch and hit the bottom, the stallion and his band were already out of sight. Kenny urged Buck on in a wild spring after them, making his horse duck bushes and leap over rocks in the chase. It was risky business, but Kenny was thinking now only of catching up with the wild horses.

As they dashed around a bend, he saw that they were overtaking the band. The mares could not run so fast as the stallion, and he was snapping at them and crowding them, but they could not hold the fast pace that Buck was setting. Slowly the gap between

Buck and the herd closed, and Kenny began to swallow the dust from the pounding hoofs ahead.

In spite of the dust screen Kenny could see the band charge into the trap. They were strung out more now, the faster horses were ahead and the slower mares were trailing. The stallion still wasn't satisfied; he kept urging the laggards on with his teeth and bumping them with his shoulders in an attempt to push them forward.

A sudden gust of wind swept the dust aside to reveal the stallion rear up on his hind legs. Two of the big mares had whirled around and were trying to charge up the arroyo, but the stallion kept heading them back into the trap. Kenny waved his hat and shouted as he followed them. The mares broke and charged back down the stream bed into the corral, with the chestnut close behind them.

Kenny held his breath as he waited for the gate to swing shut. He experienced a second of wild uncertainty when he was sure Pat had lost her nerve or else the trip stake had failed to release the gate. Then to his relief he saw it start to swing. As Buck slid to a halt, in front of it, it crashed shut and the bar dropped into place.

Pat was shouting and dancing up and down, but Kenny saw only the horses milling inside the corral. The chestnut stallion was charging from one side of the corral to the other. When Buck whinnied excitedly, the big fellow charged at the gate and struck the heavy barrier a smashing blow with his hoofs as he tried to leap over the gate. For the first time in his wild life he was cornered.

Just then Elmo came charging in and slid Pinto to a halt. The horse was sweat-streaked and his flanks were flecked with blood from Elmo's spurs. Elmo himself was still furious because Pinto had let him down. Besides, he had lost his rope and quirt and his hat, but the scowl faded from his face as he looked at the band inside the corral.

"We're rich," he said, "filthy rich."

"Most of the mares will have to be turned over to their owners," Kenny replied, "but we sure made a good haul." With that he turned suddenly and reined Buck over toward the gate.

Meanwhile, Pat had run down to the corral and was starting to climb up on the gate. Kenny swung Buck close and grabbed her arm. He swung her free of the fence and lifted her onto the saddle in front of him. Pat squirmed, but Kenny did not let go of her.

"What's the big idea?" she demanded crossly.

It wasn't necessary for Kenny to reply, for the stallion furnished the answer. There he was lunging at the gate, rearing up and reaching over the top pole with bared teeth.

"He would have bit me," Pat gasped.

"He certainly would have," Kenny said grimly, as he eased his sister to the ground.

Elmo tried to get Pinto to move in close to the gate too, but the pony refused to get nearer than twenty feet. He planted his feet and rolled his eyes wildly, for his fear of the stallion drove all sense of obedience out of his head. So Elmo didn't force him.

"I guess we're going to need help with him," Elmo remarked. "I doubt if the corral will hold him."

"Do you think Dad and Hank and Oats can handle him?" Pat asked.

"Sure, we can handle him. He'll soon quiet down," Kenny replied.

"I thought for a while that Buck was going to get chewed up like Pinto," Elmo said. "And there wasn't a thing I could do about it."

Kenny grinned. "Believe me, I was scared too."

"Now what do we do?" Pat was eager for action.

"One of us should stay here to quiet the brute down if he gets wild. We'll have to get Dad and the men."

Pat kept moving closer to the corral. "Those darling colts," she exclaimed. "I'll bet they'll be easy to tame."

Elmo dismounted, but he didn't drop Pinto's reins. His horse was well trained, but in this instance he seemed to have lost his senses and good reason.

"That sorrel over there looks just like his father," Elmo said as he stood beside Pat. "I'll catch him and give him to you. Would you like him?"

"You'll have to bring his mother with him too," Pat said.

Kenny leaned forward on Buck but kept his eyes on the chestnut.

"After he's been gentled a bit he can be used as a range stallion. He'll cut down cougar and coyote losses. I'll bet he takes over the Lazy Y herd like a general."

"He's already taken over three of them," Elmo replied with a broad grin. "We've rounded up three of our own horses along with the band."

"He'll have to be kept away from King." Elmo's eyes had begun to sparkle. "If they should ever get together, there will be a fight to end all fights."

"King is never loose. We'll let this fellow be the range boss. We've been needing a good range leader."

Elmo grinned. He knew what Kenny was thinking. Kenny was beginning to feel sorry for the stallion and was figuring out a way to let him keep his freedom.

"I guess he does belong in the hills," Elmo admitted.

Kenny looked at Elmo. He didn't want to order Elmo to stay at the corral, but he wanted to be the one to break the news of the capture at home himself. Elmo grinned at Kenny. He must have guessed what was in Kenny's mind.

"I'll build a campfire and stay here," he offered. "There's a few sandwiches left from lunch; I won't get hungry."

Kenny looked at Pat. "Well, then, you'd better ride in with me," he said. "The gang won't get here until tomorrow."

"All right. Let's get going," Pat replied. "I can hardly wait."

"We'll take the trail through the canyon. It should be clear of snow and fairly dry by now. That will cut down the time," Kenny explained.

"The trail on the south bank will be open," Elmo said. "The one along the bottom probably still has snow on it."

"The south trail is open," Pat said. "I rode up part way a few days ago, but I didn't try the river bottom trail."

Kenny boosted Pat up in front of him on Buck, and they rode down the arroyo to where Reddy was hitched. She was fidgeting nervously and whinnying, as if she realized she had missed all the excitement.

As they both rode away from the corral, they could hear the shrill, defiant call of the chestnut stallion.

"I feel kind of sorry for him," Pat said quietly.

"He'll get a better deal with us than the one he had," Kenny answered. "I bet Dad will think my idea of him as a range stallion is good."

Nothing more was said about the stallion, but both were eager to get home to break the news. And as they reached a more open stretch, they urged Buck and Reddy into a brisk canter.



Chapter 18

THE SECRET OF THE CANYON

KENNY AND PAT rode past Matt's cabin toward the mouth of Crystal River Canyon. They paused briefly in front of the cabin, although they didn't expect to find Shag on the doorstep. The yard was deserted except for a pair of golden chipmunks frisking about. Pat looked anxiously at Kenny. This had been an exciting day, but it could still end in tragedy.

"Shag wasn't in the high country, and he isn't here," Pat remarked.

Kenny didn't want to talk about it, but he had been thinking the same thing.

"We'll know what's happened when we get home," he said gruffly.

Pat's horse dropped behind as they moved down the canyon. The trail was steep and narrow; it had never been more than a pack trail blazed where there was timber and unmarked where it crossed the bare granite benches. In the spring it was almost impassable for a horse, because the bare rocks were slippery from the melting snow.

Buck and Reddy were mountain horses and knew how to manage a steep, rocky ledge, but even here they felt their way slowly, testing their footing carefully where the rocks were loose. On their left, Crystal River leaped and roared in a series of cascades, and damp mists floated upward from the water.

The trail soon flattened out somewhat as it followed a bench well above the river. In the depths below, still another trail followed the bed of the stream. This had been made by Placer miners many years before, and was the original trail through the canyon, but had been abandoned for years.

When they reached the smoother trail, Buck set a faster pace and was in the lead. Reddy kept her nose close to his tail, however, but she did not knock loose so many rocks as Buck, because she was more careful where she placed her hoofs.

As Kenny and Pat descended deeper into the canyon, twilight began to close in around them, making the red trunks of the spruce stand out like carved pillars, the underbrush a paler green. The sun still shone on the upper part of the south rim, but the entire north slope was in shadow. There banks of snow still filled the deeper ravines and raw gashes marked the slide runs.

Pat shuddered as the chill became more intense and

the gloom darker. Kenny leaned forward on Buck, eager to get him on through the narrow passage as fast as possible, but at the same time he tightened his horse's reins because he was striking out at a pace that wasn't safe. Buck didn't like the canyon any more than his rider did, and he too wanted to get through quickly.

The roar of the river rose and fell in waves of sound that beat against the cliff walls and echoed to the ridges above them and made the place even more weird. Kenny soon became aware of other sounds as they moved a jutting shoulder of rock. At first the new sound made little impression on him, then he pulled Buck in sharply. Pat moved her horse up beside him.

"What is it?" she asked.

Kenny didn't answer at once, but bent forward to catch the sound.

"It's a dog barking," she said sharply as she recognized the sound.

Kenny nodded in agreement. The sound seemed to be coming from below the ledge. He put his two forefingers into his mouth and blasted a long, sharp whistle, then he waited.

This time the barking was louder and held an eager note. There was no mistaking what it was.

"It's Shag! It's Shag!" Pat cried. "He's down there on the ledge."

"Yes," Kenny replied grimly. "It is Shag."

"He must be caught in a trap or else he's hurt. He'd come running to us if he were free." Pat leaned far forward on Reddy and tried to look over the ledge.

Kenny swung out of his saddle and looked at Pat. For a minute he didn't speak, for he did not want

her to know what he was thinking. He noticed that her face looked white in the dusky light and that her eyes were very big.

"You watch the horses," he ordered. "I'll go down and see what's wrong with him," he called back as he started down the ledge.

Pat slid out of her saddle and rushed to him. "Wait," she said. "We'll hitch the horses. I'm going with you."

Kenny opened his mouth to tell her she'd have to stay at the top, but he didn't say anything because Shag's barking had now changed to a high, thin howl that sent a chill through both of them. Pat gripped her brother's arm.

"I—won't stay here alone." Her teeth were chattering so she could barely form the words.

"All right, then, you can come with me," Kenny said gruffly. He moved the horses forward to hitch them to a sapling that grew out of a crevice in the rock wall. In this spooky place, even the best-trained horse might not stay ground-hitched. When he turned toward the edge of the trail he knew the climb down the face of the wall would be far from easy.

"Stay close to me and watch every step. If you should feel yourself slipping, grab me." He was thinking that a slip would mean a sliding fall that would likely end in the boiling river below.

Pat's fingers clutched at his arm. "I'm scared, Kenny," she said.

"I told you to stay with the horses," Kenny said. "That's what you should have done."

"I know, but I'm going with you," she replied stubbornly.

Kenny moved over the ledge and felt his way carefully down the face of the cliff. He kept an eye on Pat, but she managed to make her way without his help. Slowly they worked their way down over jutting rocks and around bushes that clung to the cliff. The treetops that had been below them when they started now became the trunks of the trees, and they were able to look up at the slope, with scattered spruce clinging to it. Below them they could see the white water of the river and a part of the old trail. By this time Shag's barking had become louder and more insistent.

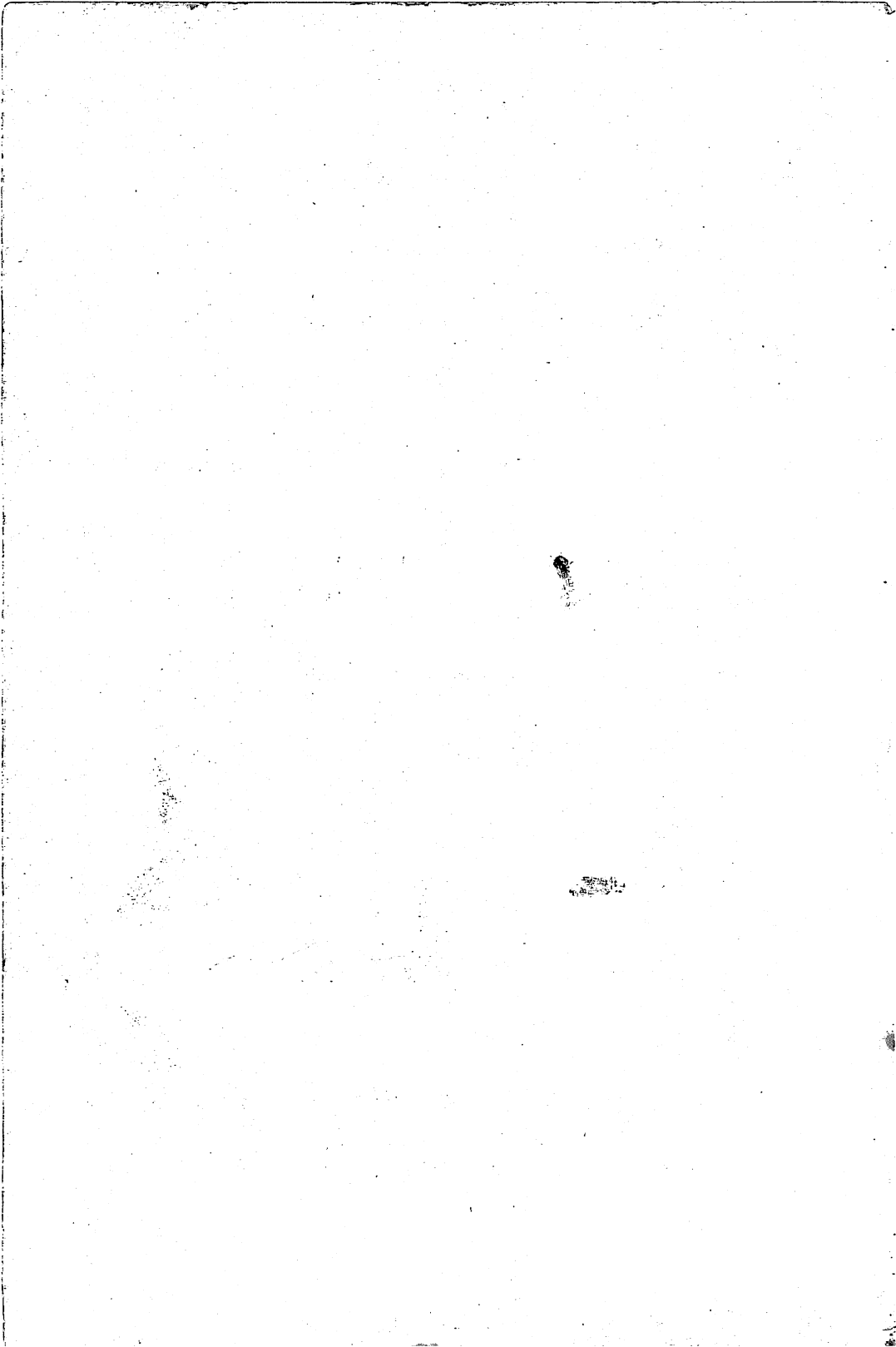
Kenny eased himself cautiously over the face of the last rock and reached up to help Pat down. They now stood on the old trail, with the roar of the river beating around them and damp mists blowing into their faces. Meanwhile, Shag's eager barking rose above the roar of the river.

Kenny moved along the rock-strewn trail with Pat so close behind him that she kept stepping on his heels. Around a shoulder of rock they saw Shag, lying on the ground near a pile of loose rocks. Kenny caught Pat's arm suddenly.

"Wait here." There was a tone in his voice that stopped her protest, even before she had a chance to voice it. She stood still, staring at Shag while Kenny hurried forward to the pile of rocks.

The collie looked up at Kenny and whined eagerly. He was lying with his paws across the straps of a pack sack, with his muzzle resting on the pack itself. Kenny knew without examining the pack that it belonged to





Matt Milner. As he straightened up after examining Shag, he knew what had happened to Matt.

Kenny turned quickly and looked across the river and up along the north wall of the canyon. What he saw was a wide, fresh made path where a slide had hurtled into the canyon. Tons of snow and rocks and trees must have plunged down that path. The snow had filled the river and had rushed up the steep bank where he now stood, possibly as high as the spot where the horses were now standing. Then it must have curled back in a mass fifty feet deep over the old trail and over the river.

The boy's glance turned to the river. He realized that when the spring floods came the river had eaten through the slide, sweeping most of it away. The mass had then melted down to a drift not more than ten feet deep on the bank above the river. Kenny looked at the bank, but he could see no sign of a body, but the pack sack half-buried under the pile of rocks gave a hint. Kenny was about to check more closely when he saw Pat coming swiftly toward him.

"Shag found him," she declared, as she stood looking at the pack sack.

"I'm not sure about that," Kenny said, "but I think he will be found."

Pat looked from the bank of dirty snow back to Kenny.

"Why did he take the lower trail?" she asked. "If he had taken the upper trail, he would have been safe."

"He may have been standing at the edge of the woods and have seen Tex leave with the rifle," Kenny stated.

"He may have decided to fool Tex; or he may have

thought this the shortest route. He had never seen the canyon in the spring, you know."

"I don't think Tex had anything to do with this, do you?"

"I don't think so," Kenny answered.

"Where is Matt now?" Pat was frightened and she moved closer to Kenny.

"Under the slide, but it will have to be blasted." Kenny caught her arm. "Come on, I'm getting you out of here."

"What about Shag?" Pat inquired.

"I don't think he'll leave Matt." Kenny bent and patted the dog's head. Shag whined in reply, but didn't lift his head from the pack.

"Why didn't he stay here all the time?" Pat asked.

"I think Matt sent him on to the cabin, possibly so he would know if anybody was waiting there for him. Until the snow melted enough to uncover the pack, Shag had no idea where Matt had gone. Once he found the pack he never left it."

Pat was shaking and holding tight to Kenny's arm, so Kenny helped her as they started to climb back up the ledge to their horses. He wasn't so sure they would ever find Matt Milner's body, but he was certain the mystery was now solved. No one ever thought that Matt or anybody else would attempt to take that lower trail. Even now it was partially snowbound, but then Matt hadn't known much about Crystal Canyon.

"How could he have been trapped? He could have run out of the path of the slide," Pat said in a worried voice, as they finally reached their horses.

"There's never much of a snowslide warning,"

Kenny said. "If you run, you may run into the path of the snow. By the time Matt knew where it was coming from, it was on him, and a snowslide moves faster than a diving plane." Kenny took his sister's elbow and for once Pat let him give her a boost into the saddle.

"His taking the lower trail kept anyone from suspecting that a slide got him," Kenny added as they rode along the ledge.

The sun was dipping low when they galloped up to the corral gate. They had ridden hard and their horses were streaked with sweat. Kenny swung down to open the corral gate.

"I'll take care of Reddy for you," he offered as he swung the gate back.

"No, I'll do it, because I want to wait and go up to the house with you," Pat said.

Fifteen minutes later Kenny and Pat entered the living room, where their father was seated by the window, his boots tossed on the floor. Mrs. Reed came in from the kitchen, intending to scold Pat for staying away all day. Kenny faced his father.

"We've had a big day," he began, trying to keep his voice steady. "We found Matt Milner's pack—he was hit by a slide."

Before his father could say anything, Pat interrupted. "We found Shag lying beside the pack." She caught her breath, then rushed on, "Kenny shot the old she-wolf and we captured a band of wild horses."

Mrs. Reed slipped an arm around her daughter and gave her husband a warning look as she said

soothingly, "Now, Pat, you mustn't get so worked up. You mustn't let your imagination run away with you."

Pat pulled away from her mother, for she knew her mother thought she must be sick or something; Pat felt her mother didn't believe her. Mr. Reed got to his feet.

"Sounds as if you two had a wild day," he said quietly. "Suppose you begin at the beginning and tell us just what happened."

Pat was so nervous and excited she kept interrupting her brother, but Kenny managed to tell his parents the whole story. His father asked an occasional question, nodded his agreement several times, and generally acted so calm that Pat finally recovered from her jitters.

When Kenny had finished his father said, "We'll get the men together and go up there right away. Did Elmo come in with you?"

"No, he stayed at the corral to watch the stallion and the mares," Kenny replied.

"You and Pat better have something to eat while I get the boys busy with tools and dynamite." Mr. Reed started pulling on his boots.

"Pat isn't going back into that canyon tonight," Mrs. Reed announced firmly.

"Certainly not," her husband replied. "She's staying home and going to bed."

Pat didn't protest—she never wanted to go into Crystal Canyon again. Kenny looked at his sister and smiled. She had gone to pieces when they got home, but when they faced the really tough part of the ordeal she had come through it like a man.

"We'll need a couple of gasoline lanterns," Kenny said to his father.

Pat jumped up hastily. "Why didn't you call Tex and tell him?" she asked.

"Let me take care of this, young lady," her father said. "You've had enough excitement for a good many days."

Pat sat down again and clasped her hands calmly in her lap. Her mother smiled at her. "Come along and help me in the kitchen before you go to bed," she said.

"You think it was the slide that got Matt?" Kenny's father asked as mother and daughter went into the kitchen.

Kenny hesitated only a moment, then answered, "I'm convinced of it."



Chapter 19

LIGHTNING

THE ONLY MEMBER of the Lazy Y family who slept that night was Elmo. He rolled up in his saddle blanket close to a log fire and spent a dreamless night at the corral. Even the coyotes howling from the mesa above failed to disturb him.

Down in Crystal Canyon, Mr. Reed and the men blasted away what was left of the slide. By four in the morning they had brought the body of Matt Milner, wrapped in a canvas tarp, up to the high trail. Shag followed, scrambling weakly over the rocks.

At the ranch there was much to be done. Pat leaped out of bed at the first sound of the returning men. She had obeyed orders and gone to bed, but she had not slept. Mrs. Reed made coffee for the silent group

gathered in the living room. For once Pat did not pester Kenny with questions, for which he was very thankful. Mr. Reed had told the men that they had found Matt Milner and that evidently he had been caught by a slide. He had also called the coroner's office and the sheriff and later had got Tex out of bed at his rooming house.

It took a great deal of persuasion on his former boss's part to get Tex to agree to ride out to the ranch. His resistance was finally broken down when Mr. Reed told him that he was needed to help bring in the wild stallion. Tex couldn't resist a chance like that.

Everyone managed to catch a few hours sleep before Tex and the coroner arrived at ten o'clock in the morning. Tex came on the official truck with the coroner. The Lazy Y crew was waiting for them impatiently. Pat kept a sharp watch from the kitchen window, for she didn't care to be at the barn when the coroner loaded Matt's body into his truck. However, she did want to be with the men when they left for Pine Valley.

When the truck pulled up at the barn Mr. Reed strode forward, nodded to the coroner, and held out a hand to Tex as he got out of the truck. Tex hesitated only a second before returning the gesture. Kenny stood beside his father; he too held out his hand to Tex.

"Good to have you back," he said.

Mr. Reed spoke for the whole crew. "We all owe you an apology, Tex, for having any doubts about you."

Hank and Oats pushed their way into the group, both looking very sheepish. Tex looked at them a moment, then the corners of his mouth broke into a friendly smile.

"Reckon I was just plain stubborn," he said. Then he turned to his boss, "I also gave Ab Collier a ring to put his mind at rest."

"Where's the body?" the coroner asked as he approached the group. He was in a hurry to do his job.

Mr. Reed nodded toward the barn. No one said a word as Mr. Reed led the coroner inside. There they found Shag waiting. He had eaten a big meal and seemed to have recovered his strength.

After the coroner had driven away, Pat came down to the corral.

"I always heard a dog wouldn't eat after he lost his master," Pat said, although she was glad Shag looked so much better already.

"Shag will soon get over his loss," Kenny said. "After a while he will learn to like us."

"Do you think we'll need to tie him up to keep him here, or will he follow us to get the stallion?" she asked.

Her brother looked at Shag, who was sniffing around the spot where the coroner's truck had been parked. "If he'll go with us, we'll take him," he said.

Shag was still uneasy, but he followed Buck and Reddy out into the meadow when the party left. Tex tried to make friends with the dog, but Shag didn't respond, although he didn't growl at him.

"We'll get on together eventually," Tex said. He was so glad to be back at the ranch that he would have tried to make friends even with his worst enemy. Tex straightened up in his saddle, and Shag trotted beside Reddy and Buck.

Several hours later six men and one girl stood beside a dusty corral. Inside, the band of mares stood quietly

gazing at the men, while the chestnut stallion paced back and forth. He was weary from fighting the heavy walls that imprisoned him, but he was still full of fire.

Oats grinned at Kenny. "What are you going to call him?" he asked.

Kenny looked first at Pat and then at Elmo. "I thought Lightning would be a good name," he suggested.

"It's perfect," Pat exclaimed eagerly.

Elmo nodded. He was still holding the wolf scalp he had been displaying. "Fits him to a T," he agreed.

Meanwhile, Mr. Reed had been studying the stallion thoughtfully. Then he turned to Tex and asked, "What do you think of him?" He knew he would get a sensible reply on such a matter of ranch interest.

Tex squinted as he considered the big horse. Finally he spoke. "Make a fine range stallion."

Kenny grinned broadly. His plan for approaching his father with the idea he had in mind wouldn't be needed—not with Tex on his side. Elmo in turn winked at Pat.

"I guess we can handle him long enough to get a brand on him," Mr. Reed said. He turned to Kenny, "What's your idea, son?"

"He won't leave Pine Valley. Why not bring our range mares up here after we take out the horses we'll have to return to the other ranches? He'd take care of the mares."

"He has some fine points, I must say. We might be able to improve our saddle stock with him. Suppose we just tame him a bit, though, before we turn him loose." Kenny's father smiled. "I wouldn't want him

driving all our mares off over the mountain. And I want him tame enough so we can get him into the lower country for the winter." He turned to Tex for his opinion.

"We'll gentle him a bit," Tex replied. "May take a few days, possibly a week or so. I guess Kenny and I could make camp here and take over."

"In that case I can spare you two from the ranch work," Mr. Reed said. His reply was enough to prove to all of them that he wanted Tex back at the Lazy Y.

Tex cleared his throat, and he turned away quickly. He shoved his hands into his pockets as he walked toward the corral gate. The boss smiled at his men.

"Well, I guess we can leave it up to Tex and Kenny," he said. "You boys can pack in a camp for them and help them dig out a spring so the horses will have water."

"You're not leaving me and Shag out of this," Pat said. "I'm bringing my pup tent up and camping here too."

Her father looked at her as she stood with her hand on Shag's head. The dog was leaning against her, his tongue hanging out contentedly.

"If the boys don't mind having you," her father said.

"I guess we can get along with her," Kenny said as he grinned at Pat.

Tex turned around, and there was a smile on his face. "We can use a cook," he said quietly.

Pat tossed her head, then she made a face at Tex. She felt warm and good inside. The Lazy Y gang hadn't changed. They were all together as they had been before the trouble.